

The Aboriginal Struggle & the Left

Terry Townshend

About the author

Terry Townsend was a longtime member of the Democratic Socialist Party and now the Socialist Alliance. He edited the online journal Links (links.org) and has been a frequent contributor to Green Left Weekly (greenleft.org.au).

Note on quotations

For ease of reading, we have made minor stylistic changes to quotations to make their capitalisation consistent with the rest of the book. The exception, however, concerns Aborigines, Aboriginal, etc., the capitalisation of which has been left unchanged as it may have political significance.

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Dexter Daniels (right) and Lupngagiari (Captain Major) arrive in Sydney to build support among the labour movement for the Gurindji struggle, 1966.

Preface

May 27, 2007, marked the 40th anniversary of the overwhelming victory of the 1967 referendum, in which almost 91% of the Australian people voted to give the federal government the constitutional power to override the brutal, degrading racist laws of the states under which Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders were tormented. The Australian people had sent a clear signal that it was time for Canberra to make laws, introduce programs and provide the necessary resources to end the racial oppression of Indigenous Australians.

In Canberra on the day of the anniversary, in an act of insulting hypocrisy, then PM John Howard, head of the most anti-Indigenous rights government that has ruled since the passage of the referendum and which sought to roll back whatever gains the Indigenous people had achieved since, presided over the main national commemorative event. He was joined by Labor leader Kevin Rudd, who has embraced the so-called “tough love” anti-welfare views of conservative Indigenous identity Noel Pearson and promoted by the Howard government. In opposition and in government Rudd supported the racist “intervention” in the Northern Territory’s Aboriginal communities.

Apart from the hypocritical and self-serving polities, the “honoured guests” of the ceremony were some of the surviving members of the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders (FCAATSI), the national organisation that spearheaded the campaign for the referendum. Unfortunately, little of the real history of the referendum movement emerged through the fog of official platitudes and cynical celebration: that the referendum, and its overwhelming endorsement by the Australian people, was the product of decades of determined political struggle by a “black-red alliance” — an Indigenous-led alliance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations with socialists, principally the activists of the Communist Party of Australia, and the left wing of the labour movement.

The pressing need for the revival of this “black-red alliance” remains. The high hopes for real action on Indigenous people’s rights and welfare that followed the

election of the ALP federal government, led by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, in November 2007 have been all but dashed.

Rudd's first act as PM was to apologise to the stolen generations. Long resisted by the Howard government as a reactionary principle, the apology was long overdue and beautifully crafted. Tens of thousands of people around the country — black and white — gathered early on February 13, 2008, to hear Rudd's genuinely moving apology. It invoked an emotional and widespread demonstration of the Australian people's desire for justice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Unfortunately, it has proved to just one of a series of high-profile yet ultimately empty acts of symbolism by the new ALP government. Rudd made it clear at the time that he would not propose or support legislation for compensation for those who suffered as a result of the policy of removing Aboriginal children from their family and culture. The Rudd ALP government has maintained and deepened the Howard government's racist NT intervention which roll backs many of the gains in terms of land rights won since the 1967 referendum.

Is the revival of the black-red alliance possible that can tap this mass popular support for Indigenous people's rights? The development of the Socialist Alliance and the involvement of significant Indigenous community leaders — including Sam Watson in Queensland and Pat Eatock in NSW, and others — shows that such a revival is indeed possible. ■

Beginnings

From its foundation in 1920, emulating the great tradition of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), the CPA and its members were uncompromising opponents of racism against Australia's Indigenous people.

To the extent that the CPA had analysed the nature of the racial oppression of the Indigenous people, it would be true to say that the party shared the “economist” approach that had also marked the IWW and the US and South African communist parties in the 1920s, a view that held that racial oppression would be eliminated as a by-product of the socialist revolution led by the organised workers, who were overwhelmingly skilled white workers.

The need for unity within the working class was considered paramount, therefore the conscious combating of racist attitudes within the working class and fighting “industrial” discrimination at the workplace was emphasised. But the need for the Aboriginal people to organise as *a people* to fight to end their oppression by campaigning for full legal, social and political rights, and especially land rights (legal recognition of their status as the original inhabitants of this country), was not yet understood.

At first, the CPA did not analyse Indigenous people's oppression separately from its general opposition to racial discrimination, the White Australia Policy and Australian nationalism, and Australian and British imperialism in the Pacific and Asia.

Nevertheless, the CPA's political understanding was well in advance of any other organisation. From the early 1920s, articles appeared in the CPA's press on the racial oppression of the Aborigines.¹ Stories criticising ALP policy on Aborigines appeared in *Workers' Weekly*, the CPA's newspaper, in 1925. The July 1, 1927, issue of *Workers' Weekly* challenged the near universal view propounded by bourgeois historians and politicians that Australia had been settled without violence against, and resistance from, the Aboriginal people.²

The article argued that from the outset the colonisation of Australia was accompanied by the attempted “physical extermination” — genocide in today's language — of the Indigenous people, and that “inhuman exploitation, forced labour and actual

slavery” of Aboriginal workers, especially in the outback pastoral industries, continued. It went on to state that cases of racist mistreatment of Indigenous people were not aberrations, as claimed by the capitalist press and politicians, but typical “crimes that accompany private property and [capitalist] class rule”.

In the late 1920s, prominent CPA cultural workers (and others influenced by the party) were exposing the injustices faced by Indigenous people. Katherine Susannah Prichard’s novel *Coonardoo*, which was published in 1929, denounced the exploitation of Aboriginal pastoral workers on the cattle stations in Western Australia’s northwest. It was based on her observations during an extended stay on a cattle station in northwest WA. ■

The North Australian Workers Union in the 1920s & '30s

In the late 1920s and early 1930s, communists active in the North Australian Workers Union (NAWU), which from 1927 covered all workers in the Northern Territory, fought against the union leadership's racist exclusion of "full blood" Aborigines, Asians and Aboriginal-Asian workers from membership [the union's rules allowed "Australian-born children of Mixed Parentage (European on one side)" to be members]. The April 13, 1928, *Workers' Weekly* argued that the correct working-class response was not to abandon super-exploited Aboriginal workers, whose "cheap labour" supposedly threatened the livelihood of white workers, but to fight for equal wages for all regardless of race. Because of the agitation by CPA members in the NAWU, in 1928 the union's annual conference voted to hold a plebiscite to change the union's rules to admit "any coloured person born in Australia who has passed a 3rd class school examination standard". The proposal lost 51 votes for, 109 against.³

It is worth noting that anti-racist activism by revolutionary socialists in Darwin predated the formation of the CPA. Antonio Cubillo, a Filipino Australian who had worked in the pearling industry and was the husband of an Aboriginal woman, in 1912 campaigned against the renewed enforcement of the racist "whites only" employment policy in the waterfront and maritime industries, in which many Aboriginal and Asian workers were then employed. The conservative Australian Workers Union (AWU) also refused to membership to Asian and Aboriginal-Asian workers and supported the "colour bar". Cubillo linked up with the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), and unsuccessfully attempted to form an IWW branch in 1915.⁴

The May 16, 1930, *Workers' Weekly* continued to argue that it was in the interests of white workers to organise together with Indigenous workers, graphically describing the terrible conditions they were subjected to:

The aboriginal natives of Australia are exploited as ruthlessly as the natives of any other land which flies the flag of the British Empire. Although most of us know a little about

the exploitation of the native population of the other countries, we do not know much of the intense exploitation of these natives being exploited by the same white-skinned parasites who exploit [sic] us, we brush it aside as being unimportant and assume that being “superior” we have no need to worry about such primitive people as the Australian natives. Let the workers in Australia face facts: let us look at things as members of the international working class and not as isolated, supposedly superior, workers ... In north Australia ... the native receives the very low sum of 5/- per week, flour, tea and sugar. He has to catch his own meat, which is chiefly wallaby and kangaroo. If he does get beef, it is rarely more than the offal and such scraps as the station owners cannot use ... Even the meagre pay of the aboriginals is in many instances withheld by the managers or owners of stations employing them, and having no protection from the NAWU, they are thus a menace to the higher-paid white workers who are striving to maintain their living standards. In drovers’ camps the aboriginals are terribly exploited and in many cases cruelly ill-treated; corned beef and damper with black tea in none too plentiful measure is what they exist on during their long hours of toil. They have also to take in hand the roughest horses and broken bones are the rewards for this dangerous work ... The unionists of the North must see that these workers, full-blooded as well as half-caste aboriginals, are organised into the union of workers. Let our slogans be: Workers of the world unite! Away with racial barriers! Onward to communism!

At the 1930 conference, CPA members moved, again unsuccessfully, for the admission of “all bona-fide workers irrespective of colour”, an attempt to enrol Aboriginal, Chinese and Asian workers.⁵ According to Regina Ganter a “communist-inspired unionist” by the name of Mahoney, a leader of the CPA-led Unemployed Workers’ Movement (UWM) in Darwin, was popular with the “‘coloured’ community” and campaigned for Aboriginal and Asian workers’ rights throughout the depression years and into the 1930s.⁶ In 1929, the UWM organised a demonstration in Darwin against unemployment, which was “supported by most of the ‘coloured’ community”, including the Aboriginal, Chinese and other Asian communities. In a Darwin UWM conference resolution published in the November 6, 1931, *Worker’s Weekly*, Mahoney declared: “... members of this movement are of the opinion that slavery of the worst type is being perpetrated in the Northern Territory towards the aboriginal and half-caste race, and we shall do all in our power to force the government to do away with their present slave conditions and grant them an immediate improvement in their conditions. With the objective of bringing their complete emancipation ... we demand that they be granted full rights to enter any trade union and have full political rights. Furthermore, we condemn the present capitalist class and the various governments, especially the

federal Labor government, for allowing this slavery to continue without protest. We, furthermore, condemn the churches and mission [sic] and trade union [sic] for not taking up the struggle on behalf of aborigines ... to bring about their complete emancipation from the present system.” In 1931, Mahoney was arrested during a protest against the deportation of striking Asian pearling crews.⁷

Joe McGinness, who would later become a central NAWU leader and later a key national leader of the Indigenous people’s rights movement, was one of the young Aborigines drawn into political activity by the UWM. McGinness was the son of an Indigenous Kungarakan woman and an Irish railway worker and tin miner father. Upon the sudden death of his father, Joe’s mother Lucy was stripped of her legal right to the mining lease, and with his brother Val, they were forcibly removed to the Darwin Kahlin Aboriginal Compound and made wards of the “Chief Protector of Aborigines”. Lucy had to walk two miles each day to work for a pittance and leftover food as a housemaid for a senior judge. In 1927, 13-year-old Joe travelled to and from Kahlin to work in a variety of jobs in Darwin too.

“During the times that I was unemployed in Darwin”, Joe McGinness wrote in his autobiography, “I took part with other coloureds in demonstrations and marches to highlight our plight. The demonstrations were directed towards meeting our need of gaining full-time employment. At one particular demonstration [in 1931], our action involved camping on the verandah of the government offices for the best part of a week”.⁸ ■

Comintern Influence

In 1929, a new CPA leadership was elected, endorsed by the now-Stalinised Comintern and loyal to the raft of Comintern decisions that launched the “Third Period”. According to Hannah Middleton, the CPA leadership “received encouragement (from the Comintern) to apply to the particular conditions in Australia the national and colonial policy developed by that body under the decisive leadership of Lenin”.⁹ In fact, Stalin’s Comintern demanded from affiliates throughout the world unquestioning implementation of its directives, regardless of how appropriate for the specific national circumstances.

The September 24, 1931, *Workers’ Weekly* reported on the adoption of the “Communist Party’s of Australia Fight for Aborigines: Draft Programme of Struggle Against Slavery”. The document was an attempt to reconcile the new line of the Comintern — which in 1928 imposed the call for the creation of a independent “native republic” in South Africa and a “Black republic” in southern USA — with political and social reality in Australia. The first 13 points read like the demands of the post-1972 Indigenous people’s rights movement, addressing questions like land rights, the stolen generations, stolen wages and Indigenous control over Indigenous affairs.

Point 1 of the 14 points called for “Full and equal rights of all aborigines — economically, socially and politically”; point 2 demanded “Absolute political freedom for aborigines and half-castes; [the] right to membership in, and [the] right to organise political, economic and cultural organisations, ‘mixed’ or aboriginal”; and point 3 called for the “Removal of all colour restrictions ... in professions, sports etc.”. Point 10 demanded that Aboriginal children be permitted to attend public and high schools and sit for all examinations.

The program demanded equal wages, working conditions and unemployment payments; the outlawing of all forms of unpaid and forced labour; the abolition of the Aboriginal Protection Boards (which it described as “capitalism’s slave recruiting agencies and terror organisations”); the “Liquidation of all missions and so-called homes for aborigines, as these are part of the weapons being used to exterminate the

aboriginal race by segregating the sexes and sending the young girls into slavery”; and the “unconditional release” of all Aboriginal prisoners and no further arrests until Aboriginal juries can hear and decide cases involving Aborigines.

It also demanded the “Absolute prohibition of the kidnapping of aboriginal children by the APB[s]” and the “Full and unrestricted right of aboriginal and half-caste parents to their children, without living in constant fear that the APB or mission stations will kidnap them to send into slavery”.

Point 12 opposed forced assimilation, calling for the “Full right of the aborigines to develop native culture. [The] Right to establish their own schools, train their own teachers ... The Australian government to make available sums of money for such purposes, to be paid into and controlled by committees comprised solely of aborigines and half-castes.”

Almost as if tacked on the end to satisfy Moscow, point 14 demanded: “The handing over to the aborigines of large tracts of watered and fertile country, with towns, seaports, railways, roads, etc., to become one or more independent aboriginal states or republics. The handing back to the aborigines of all Central, Northern and North-West Australia to enable the aborigines to develop their native pursuits. These aboriginal republics to be independent of Australia or other foreign powers. To have the right to make treaties with foreign powers, including Australia, establish their own army, governments, industries, and in every way be independent of imperialism.”¹⁰

Yet, despite the formal adoption of the Comintern-inspired call for the creation of “independent aboriginal republics” in “Central, Northern and North West Australia”, the CPA did not seriously campaign for their creation. Instead, communists in practice concentrated on the fight to win full social, political and economic equality for Indigenous people, quietly dropping the “independent republic” slogan or interpreting it to mean granting full legal ownership rights over Indigenous people’s traditional lands, as well as missions and reserves. As in the United States and South Africa, the positive effect of the Comintern’s imposition of the “Black Republic Thesis” was a greater recognition that the Indigenous people’s struggle *as a people*, not simply as workers, to end racial oppression and win civil rights in and of itself has a revolutionary dynamic. In spite of the later considerable negative consequences of the increasingly Stalinised “international communist movement”, the CPA’s inspiration from the Russian Revolution and its contact with communist and national liberation movements across the world through the Comintern provided Australian socialists with an internationalist perspective which was lacking in the social democratic parties of the Second International.

By 1935 the Stalinist Soviet bureaucracy’s diplomatic needs had changed and the Comintern was no longer pressing CPs to apply the 1928 thesis, something even ASIO

conceded, noting “the Soviet government’s change of front on international action from ‘anti-imperialism’ to a call for ‘collective security’ against fascism and the development of ‘united front’ action in connection therewith”.¹¹

This reflected the actual dynamics of the oppression of Australia’s Indigenous people, which was not based on national oppression but on racism, which the capitalist class and state used to justify and entrench the systematic social, economic and political marginalisation of Aboriginal people within the Australian nation. Racism also was used to justify the original violent seizure the Indigenous people’s land, and to permanently deny the restitution of their property rights. This racially sanctioned marginalisation restricted the overwhelming majority of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders to a super-exploited layer of the working class, concentrated in the outback and rural areas as a reserve army of rural labour. ■

The 1930s

Bob Boughton points out, “Throughout the 1930s, the CPA garnered support for its policy within all movements in which it had influence, involved itself in specific campaigns and developed its links with other activists in the Indigenous rights movement”.¹² Among the examples Boughton and others cite were:

In 1931 in rural NSW, the CPA-controlled “red union”, the Pastoral Workers Industrial Union, a militant breakaway from the right-wing Australian Workers Union (AWU), assisted Aborigines. In 1932, Aboriginal activists and the CPA-influenced Unemployed Workers Movement in Dubbo joined forces to protest the refusal of rations to unemployed Aborigines, and campaigned for the abolition of the Aboriginal Protection Board.¹³ Future leader of the important Aborigines Progressive Association Bill Ferguson settled in Dubbo in 1933 and “forged good relations with unemployed workers’ organisers”.¹⁴ Similar alliances around similar demands in NSW resulted in stopworks, protests and strikes, including in Wallaga Lake, Menindee, Burnt Bridge, Brewarrina and Purfleet.¹⁵ As already noted, in Darwin, the UWM also made “common cause” with Aboriginal workers and unemployed, who could not rely on the NAWU officials.¹⁶

In Sydney, Lucy Eatock was active in the CPA and UWM with her sons Richard Alexander (Alex), Adam, Noel, Roderick (Dick) and William Donald (Don), and daughter Lindsay.

Lucy was an Aboriginal woman born in Queensland, where she met and married an Indigenous stockman, William Eatock. Working on a property there in the mid-1890s, Lucy learned from the shearers about the great depression and the class struggles of 1890s, “of the hardships [the shearers] had met . . . the benefits the Shearers’ Union had brought them and of the work that was still to be achieved in the future . . . They spoke of equality, and although there was no mention of Aborigines or women, they set Lucy’s imagination flying.”¹⁷ During World War I, in Sydney Lucy participated in the mass anti-conscription campaign and, according to family biographer Joan Eatock, joined the Industrial Workers of the World. After the formation of the CPA, Lucy

came into contact with the party at Speakers' Corner in the Sydney Domain, where she continued to spruik for many years to come.¹⁸

Lucy and her sons lived in the western suburbs of Sydney and would regularly travel into Glebe by horse and dray with mutton and blackberry pies for the destitute. Lucy was "one of the principals in all communist disturbances in the city and suburbs", a Glebe detective sergeant claimed at the time. Noel and Dick were active in the UWM's anti-eviction campaigns across Sydney.

In 1931, Alex Eatock was shot in the thigh by police during an anti-eviction struggle in Bankstown. According to a June 18, 1931 *Sydney Morning Herald* report, under the headline "Communists fight police, riot at Bankstown", "One of the most serious disturbances ever dealt with by the police in New South Wales occurred at Bankstown yesterday morning when 40 policemen carrying out an eviction order fought a pitched battle with 16 men defending a barricaded house. Nearly every combatant was injured, some seriously ... The police had to force their way into the house ... which was barricaded in an amazing fashion with sandbags and barbed wire entanglements."¹⁹

On the night of the "riot", a huge demonstration of Bankstown locals expressed indignation of the vicious treatment of the UWM defenders by the cops. About 30 carloads of the fascist paramilitary New Guard turned up to try to disrupt the protest but were driven away when workers from nearby pubs and pool halls. The Eatocks, who had just visited Alex in hospital, were in thick of the protest.²⁰

Alex Eatock was charged with resisting arrest and obstructing police in the execution of their duties. Lucy was arrested outside the court on the first day of the trial of the 17 charged.²¹ "Supporters of the charged men gathered outside Darlinghurst Court. Lucy, resplendent in hat and gloves, and Lindsay, with her little daughter Rosa in her arms, joined the crowd. Unable to gain admittance, the assembly of several hundred people became restive ... Lucy exhorted them to sing the 'Red Flag', and within a few minutes the constabulary had arrested the provocateurs."²² Lindsay, who the prosecuting police inspector described as "the leader of men who call themselves communists", was jailed for 10 days for insulting a police officer; Lucy was charged with riotous behaviour and accepted a 12-month good-behaviour bond rather than face one month in jail.

Alex and the others charged were defended by a legal team that included CPA member Christian Jollie Smith. Alex was twice arrested and charged with delivering a public address in a prohibited area for attempting to use the courtroom to expose the conditions and injustices faced by Australian workers. Despite conflicting evidence, Alex was sentenced to 18 months' jail.²³ An appeal to the High Court resulted in a retrial being ordered, however in the meantime the police had charged Alex on more

serious counts. At retrials of the men, the convictions were upheld. Addressing the court, Alex declared: "I am not guilty, in spite of the fact that the jury says I am ... It seems the whole thing is class and racial oppression, nothing more or less."²⁴

The Eatocks collectively were now to be the subject of a long-running police vendetta.

On October 25, 1932, just days after Alex's conviction, police attacked a 2000-strong UWM-organised demonstration of the unemployed in Glebe, who were protesting against the state government's tightening of the rules to get the dole. Throughout Alex's retrial, Noel Eatock had picketed the courthouse holding a placard, which the vindictive cops had duly noted. Lucy had asked Noel to stay away from the protest, but he turned up anyway. When Lucy sensed that the crowd was getting agitated, she told Noel to go home to get a chair for the speakers to stand on. When he got home, he had a cup of tea. While he was away, police attacked and dispersed the demonstration with batons and guns drawn. Later that day, Noel was arrested and charged with assault of a police officer and grievous bodily harm — even though many witnesses testified that at the time of the "riot" Noel was not present at the protest. Visiting Alex in jail, Lucy — now secretary of the Glebe UWM — told him of Noel's arrest, to which Alex replied: "... the whole family is considered a thorn in the side of the establishment and if we even spit on the wrong side of the road they'll send us down."²⁵

Noel was sentenced to two and half years' jail in 1933. He was released in 1935. A campaign against the victimisation, police frame-up and racist jailings of the Eatocks was pivotal in the consolidation of the early Trotskyist movement in Sydney.²⁶ Tensions developed between Lucy and the CPA leadership over the extent of party support for the campaign, and over financial support for the families of jailed UWM members. According to Joan Eatock, Noel "had been associated with a group that called itself the Left Opposition to the Communist Party ... Noel and his ilk were seen to be undermining party unity. Although it was never openly stated, it became obvious that this was the reason why the Communist Party was reluctant to come to the young man's aid." Trotskyists Jack Sylvester, Issy Wyner and others expelled from the CPA publicised the cause of the Eatock Defence Committee in their small newspaper, the *Tocsin*. So too did the Balmain UWM, also influenced by the Left Oppositionists.²⁷

The disputes and disappointments over the CPA's role in the defence campaigns led to the Eatocks leaving the CPA. Lucy's daughter Lindsay Mountjoy had stood as a CPA candidate in the 1930 NSW state election, "attract[ing] crowds which overflowed onto Parramatta Road"; she was married to CPA organiser Bill Mountjoy, who worked with some of the Eatock sons at the St Peters brickyard.²⁸ In 1932, Lindsay and Bill

moved to Western Australia to organise the CPA there. She remained a loyal member of the CPA until her death in 1988.²⁹

In Melbourne, communist women helped organise the 1934 International Women's Day rally, addressed by Aboriginal activist Anna Morgan, who denounced the Aboriginal Protection Board and called for equal access to social welfare. In 1934, the CPA helped organise nationwide protests against the decision of an NT court to hang eight Aboriginal men convicted of murder, likening the case to infamous "Scottsboro Boys" legal lynching in the US. The June 8, 1934, *Workers' Weekly* urged: "Remember that imperialism has the blood of hundreds of thousands of native Australians on its filthy claws, and that the time has come when the proletariat must break short this long list of victims." In Sydney in August 1934, CPA trade unionist Tom Wright helped organise a protest meeting in Sydney. According to Len Fox, "The meeting was one of the first, if not the first, in which prominent white Australians of different beliefs came together to protest against injustice towards Aborigines."³⁰

The UWM and the CPA's legal defence organisation International Labor Defence organised a national campaign, which included public meetings with broad speakers' platforms, as well as mass letter-writing campaigns. Through the party's international contacts, the case attracted international attention. This political pressure contributed to one of the "Fitzmaurice River Boys" being released by the High Court and the death sentences on the other seven being commuted.³¹

Communists were influential in the adoption in 1933 of a resolution by the NSW Labor Council that supported Aboriginal control over "tribal sanctuaries". In 1937, Tom Wright, who was CPA general secretary between 1925 and 1929, now NSW Labor Council's vice-president and secretary of the Sheet Metal Workers' Union and a CPA central committee member, invited Aborigines Progressive Association (APA) activist William Ferguson to address the council. In response, the council voted to pledge full support for the APA and adopt "a detailed policy on Aborigines ... calling for full social and political rights, award wages, full unemployment benefits, abolition of all indenture[d labour], and [the abolition of] homes or missions ... full representation on the Aborigines Protection Board ... and land rights". The policy closely resembled the CPA's 1931 program, minus the demand for Aboriginal republics and the freeing of all Aboriginal prisoners.³² ■

Aboriginal-Led Organisations & the Day of Mourning

The CPA's activities were not restricted to immediate "bread and butter" struggles for equality at work. The CPA also forged alliances with the independent Aboriginal-led organisations that emerged in the 1930s to campaign for Indigenous people's broader civil rights, including land rights and the abolition of the Protection Boards. Aboriginal communists directly participated in these organisations.

According to Heather Goodall, Aboriginal activists in the Australian Aborigines League (AAL) developed "close personal connections" with members of the CPA; in 1936 the league affiliated with the communist-influenced Australian Peace Council.³³ Goodall also noted that, "especially in Melbourne, the Communist Party gave sustained support" to the AAL-APA coalition.³⁴

Prominent AAL leader Margaret Tucker, a founder of the organisation and its Melbourne vice-president in 1938, became politicised after she moved from the countryside to Melbourne in 1925. During the Depression, she, as were many other Aboriginal people, was influenced by the CPA's agitation for, and solidarity with, the poor and unemployed. A short newsreel titled *A Princess of an Ancient Tribe* was produced in 1935, in which Tucker appeals for "equal rights so that my people can have the same opportunities as our white brothers and sisters".³⁵ In the 1983 documentary *Lousy Little Sixpence*, which deals with the "stolen generations" and the virtual slavery conditions kidnapped Aboriginal children were subjected to, Tucker notes that the CPA played a role in the newsreel's production. Tucker also describes the party's role in her political awakening: "[The CPA] seemed to speak a lot of what I was feeling ... it built up my thinking".³⁶

Despite his loyal membership of the ALP and the AWU, NSW APA leader William Ferguson worked closely with individual CPA members throughout the 1930s and '40s, finding the CPA to be the only party to give unstinting support to the APA's campaign for full citizenship rights. Attwood notes that Ferguson "made many contacts

with ... trade unionists and left-wing political activists in Sydney” and among “these allies were Communist Party members such as trade union leader Tom Wright”.³⁷ However, Ferguson’s biographer Jack Horner claims that while Ferguson welcomed the support of individual communists he was unable to cooperate with them on an organisational level, with conflict arising over the communists’ desire to influence policy and tactics.³⁸

(In 1949, after many disappointments, Ferguson submitted his resignation from the ALP after Labor’s federal interior minister H.V. Johnson defended the continued use of neck chains for Aboriginal prisoners in the NT and unequal wages for Aboriginal pastoral workers. Ferguson stood for parliament as an independent in the Dubbo electorate in the 1949 federal election.)

The 1930s upsurge in the movement for Indigenous people’s rights culminated on January 26, 1938, with the APA-AAL-organised national all-Indigenous protest during the sesquicentenary anniversary of the British invasion. About 100 Aboriginal men, women and children defiantly gathered in the Australian Hall (which for many years after was better known as the Mandolin Cinema at 150 Elizabeth Street, Sydney) to call for full citizen’s rights. They called the day a “Day of Mourning and Protest”, because, in the words of the organisers: “the 26th of January, 1938, is not a day of rejoicing for Australia’s Aborigines; it is a day of mourning. This festival of 150 years of so-called ‘progress’ in Australia commemorates also 150 years of misery and degradation imposed upon the original native inhabitants by the white invaders of this country.”

“Their intention was to bring awareness of their plight to white Australia, in order to gain support for their argument about the need to dismantle the Protection Boards operating at the time and to extend full citizen rights to Aboriginal people. Participants included Jack Patten, William Ferguson, Pastor Doug Nicholls, Pearl Gibbs, William Cooper, Margaret Tucker”.³⁹ APA President Jack Patten announced, “The conference is called to bring home to the white people of Australia the frightful conditions in which the native aborigines of this continent live. We ask for full citizen rights, including old age pensions, maternity bonus, relief work when unemployed, and the right to a full education for our children”.⁴⁰ Tom Wright organised trade union support for the protests and helped draft the manifesto the meeting issued, which the CPA printed and distributed around Australia.⁴¹

The CPA was among the first organisations to make Australians aware of the injustice of what would become known as the “stolen generations”, as well as the issue of stolen wages. Novelist and CPA member Jean Devanny wrote an article in the March 25, 1938, *Workers’ Weekly* which condemned the practices. The article ended with the demand: “Full citizen rights of all aborigines, with proper facilities, educational

and economic, to enable them to take an equal place in the community with whites!”⁴²

In 1939, the CPA produced a new document on Aboriginal rights, written by Wright, entitled *New Deal for Aborigines*, which took up issues of racism beyond the industrial sphere. Wright met with Olive Pink, a longtime campaigner for Aboriginal rights, at the CPA headquarters in 1938; Pink had come into contact with a country CPA organiser Norman Jeffrey, who urged her to visit the CPA Sydney office.⁴³ Wright “incorporated much of Pink’s thinking in his pamphlet . . . with an emphasis upon land rights and indigenous control of mineral and other resources . . . Pink continued her association with Wright and made him trustee of her research before she died in 1975”.⁴⁴

In February 1939, after a three-decades-plus bitter struggle to defend their land rights from the NSW Protection Board and self-serving white farmers intent on dispossessing them of their well-run farms, residents of the Cumeragunja* reserve on the NSW side of the NSW-Victorian border declared a “strike” and walked off their land. The strikers crossed the Murray River and set up camp in Victoria, refusing to return until the brutal reserve manager was sacked and their land returned to them.⁴⁵

The Victorian Communist Party newspaper, the *Workers’ Voice*, supported the strikers. They had been “driven to open revolt by the brutality of officials that treated them like animals”, it reported. It was the only newspaper to carry reports that reflected the views of the Cumeragunja people.⁴⁶ The support campaign was led by the Victorian-based AAL, which was led by many Aboriginal people with a close connection to Cumeragunja.

The racist attitude of the Labor Party was summed up by an article in the Labor broadsheet, the *Daily Telegraph*: “The simple minds of the refugees are so cluttered up with other wrongs, real or fancied, that they hardly know themselves what it was that sent them across the river. In some cases it appears to have been primitive superstition”.⁴⁷

The CPA was one of the few organisations that genuinely campaigned for support for the people of Cumeragunja. As Attwood states:

In backing the walk-off, the League found that militant trade unionists and Communist Party members were eager to support what they saw as a strike. Together, the League and its radical left-wing allies began appealing for moral and material support for “the strikers” . . . [AAL leaders] Doug Nicholls, George Patten, Margaret Tucker and Caleb Morgan spoke on the Yarra Bank [where outdoors political speakers addressed crowds] alongside trade unionists and other activists and raised money . . . The League and its

* Cumeragunja is also spelled Cumerooonja or Commerooonja in other sources.

allies organised a meeting that passed a resolution calling for a government inquiry ...

Most importantly, the League appealed to the Australian Council of Trade Unions as well as communist front organisations such as the Australian League for Peace and Democracy. Up until this time, the [AAL] had had links with the Australian Labor Party and had made some appeals to the trade union movement, but this marked a new departure for the organisation ... This left-wing support for the walk-off was formalised by the founding of a new organisation, the Aborigines' Assistance Committee. It appointed George Patten as its organiser and [Margaret] Tucker and [Bill] Onus as the League's representatives ...

In July [1939] the League and the Aborigines' Assistance Committee began a special public campaign ... focused on the immediate crisis but also drew attention to the wider set of problems ... [They] urged the appointment of a royal commission to investigate Aboriginal affairs in NSW and issued a series of demands that closely resembled those the League had been making ... These included the "full exclusive right of Aborigines to the lands vested in the NSW Aborigines Welfare Board"; the "development of cooperative and/or community life in all farm and industrial ... undertakings", preferably managed by elected Aboriginal boards; "grants of additional areas of suitable land" wherever the present reserves were inadequate for communal farming; majority representation of Aborigines on the Aborigines Welfare Board pending its abolition ... and better education facilities. Some of these were incorporated in a general resolution calling on the federal and state governments for change in Aboriginal policies. It passed at a meeting organised by the Left Book Club in Melbourne in August that ... attracted over 1000 people. This new campaign won the support of some trade unions in Melbourne but suffered a serious setback when the labour movement in new South Wales refused to back it.⁴⁸

Unfortunately, this failure of the NSW labour movement resulted in the protest being starved into submission after nine months' struggle. Nevertheless, veterans of the campaign would feature in the national leadership of the postwar Aboriginal rights movement. Despite defeat, many of those involved believed they had "struck a blow for freedom".⁴⁹ ■

Struggles in the 1940s: The Pilbara Stock Workers' Strike

The CPA moved further to the centre of the key Aboriginal rights struggles during the 1940s and 1950s. In this period, many important Aboriginal leaders were also CPA members, or worked closely with and respected the party.

Many writers agree on an important factor in many Aboriginal workers in northern Australia recognising that they were in fact workers entitled to better pay and conditions — the impact of World War II. During the war, more than 1000 Aborigines were employed by the army and air force in the Northern Territory. They worked on military and air bases, in the maintenance and workshops that kept military trucks operating. They learned new skills and trades. The armed forces paid cash wages and dependents were provided with full army rations. Aboriginal workers were formally treated the same as white workers. As CD Rowley described it: “the army worked a five and half day week, and paid overtime. It provided ample food, tobacco, and clothing; and there were sweets and luxuries at canteen prices for all, with preference for the children. Housing provided good shelter, and [Aboriginal workers took] pride in furniture and other possessions . . . the householders had brought locks to protect their wealth. They had access to laundries, clothes lines, and flat irons; good sanitation, running water, plenty of soap. There was a planned diet, of foods which they learned to cook, some schooling, and medical attention — in fact everything which from their previous experience they would assume to be only for those in the homestead [station owners]”.⁵⁰ When the war ended, the stark differences between their pay (or lack of) and conditions on the stations, and the awful rations, were very apparent.

The most significant struggle of the 1940s was the epic 1946-49 Pilbara Aboriginal stock workers' strike, which has been described as “a foundation story of the postwar land rights movement”.⁵¹ In 1942, WA CPA member Don McLeod was invited to a station workers' meeting in the Pilbara region in state's northwest. Author Dorothy Hewett, who was a CPA member in Perth at the time, described McLeod as a “well-

sinker and wharfie, he worked around the North-West stations with an old [Indigenous traditional] lawman and songmaker called Kitchener. Together, by the light of a hurricane lantern, they have read The Marxist Classics and dreamed of a great strike of Aborigines in the Pilbara. The first meeting of Aborigines, which led eventually to the strike, was held at Skull Springs on the Davis River in 1942. Two hundred Aborigines and senior lawmen came from a thousand miles away to attend this traditional meeting, which took place every 50 years or so. This meeting lasted six weeks and 16 interpreters were needed for the 23 language groups represented”.⁵²

McLeod had won the trust and respect of Indigenous communities there, having helped them campaign against apartheid regulations that banned Aboriginal people from entering towns without a work permit. In 1943, when police used wartime powers to threaten Aboriginal workers in Port Hedland with “evacuation *en masse*” from the district, they went on strike against the permit system. McLeod travelled to Perth to put the community’s grievances before the Commissioner of Native Affairs. His petitions, including an application for a 28,500-acre lease for an Aboriginal-owned and -run station, were refused. In Port Hedland, he established a branch of the Anti-Fascist League, to which the local Aboriginal rights organisation, the Euralian Association, affiliated.⁵³

By July 1944, plans were already underway for strike action. In that month, McLeod reported to the CPA Central Committee on the preparations. The struggle’s Indigenous leaders — including Clancy McKenna, Captain, Dougal, Dooley Bin Bin and Kitchener — were travelling from station to station preparing the workers for action. Meanwhile, the authorities were operating under the racist delusion that Aborigines could not organise themselves, and were being manipulated by “outside troublemakers” (a common refrain to this day by racist government ministers and the big capitalist editorial writers whenever Indigenous people take action).

In what must be one of the great political miscalculations of the century, the WA Labor government’s Native Affairs Commissioner believed that “all that was required was to keep a close watch on McLeod and ‘throw the book’ at him for the slightest infringement of the Native Administration Act”.⁵⁴

On April 27, 1946, Aboriginal stock workers began walking off the stations; by May 5, 20 stations were on strike. Police immediately arrested McKenna, Dooley and McLeod. Four hundred strikers marched on the jail armed with crowbars and hammers, forcing McLeod’s release. “The young men, marching through the streets of Hedland to demand the release of Don McLeod, put the fear of Christ into the white inhabitants”, reported Dorothy Hewett.⁵⁵ CPA members in Perth swung into action, establishing a broad Committee for the Defence of Native Rights (CDNR). It

held several successful meetings, including a 400-strong public meeting that endorsed the strikers' calls for increased wages and demanded the release of the strike's leaders. The CDNR provided a lawyer to defend them, and set about galvanising support from trade unions, women's organisations, churches and local authorities, as well as winning international support by bringing the struggle to the attention of the World Federation of Trade Unions and the United Nations. A pamphlet on the strike was produced.

The WA Labor government retreated temporarily. McLeod was released, while McKenna and Dooley were released before the expiration of their three-month sentences. Rations for Aboriginal workers' and their families were improved, and in July some pastoralists agreed to wage increases.⁵⁶ When McLeod returned to the Pilbara with CDNR secretary the Reverend Peter Hodge, they were arrested for addressing a meeting of Aborigines. Hodge was fined and McLeod imprisoned, but freed on appeal to the High Court.⁵⁷

Dorothy Hewett noted that a "ban of almost total silence descended on the West Australian press, but in the [CPA's Perth newspaper] *Workers' Star* we were printing Don McLeod's dispatches from the Nor'-West as if they came from the revolutionary front".⁵⁸

CPA-led and -influenced trade unions offered whole-hearted support. Paddy Troy's Coastal Dock River and Harbour Works Union (CDRHwu) "immediately declared its support for the Aborigines and persuaded the Fremantle District [Labour] Council to do the same; other unions and district councils joined them ... The dockies struck a levy of sixpence a week from each member to support the strikers ... the CDRHWU rallied to [McLeod's] support in subsequent brushes with the law, and the dockies found employment for Aborigines in their union at a time when it was very difficult for them to win acceptance in the metropolitan workforce."⁵⁹ At one point, the coppers ordered Aboriginal workers off the docks, but the wharfies refused to work without them. The police brought in strikebreakers, but the seafarers refused to work with them.⁶⁰

By November 1946, more Indigenous workers had joined the strike. In December 1946, Dorothy Hewett arrived to write a story on the strike and offer solidarity. A lasting product of the visit was the ballad "Clancy and Dooley and Don McLeod", which became popular for many years among left-wing folk music enthusiasts.⁶¹ In March 1949, as the strike was about to enter its fourth year, police arrested 30 strikers for "abducting' stockmen off stations, enforcing their own law that no-one could return to work without permission". In response, Aboriginal workers walked off most of the remaining stations, bringing the pastoral industry in the Pilbara to a virtual halt.

The Seamen's Union called for the release of the strikers, threatening to black ban wool from the stations where "slave conditions still apply". When more strikers were arrested in June, the seafarers imposed the ban.

Again the CPA's international connections resulted in the workers' cause gaining publicity throughout the world, culminating in October 1949 with Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Vishinsky denouncing Australia before the United Nations for flouting Aboriginal workers' human rights.⁶² The strike triggered fevered fears among some. A September 19, 1947, newspaper report in ASIO's files, headlined "'Red' Abos Report Not Believed", reports the Lord Mayor of Perth's warning that "communism is rampant among natives and they [are] hostile to white people." After Australia's longest continuous strike, the WA Native Affairs Department finally abandoned support for the pastoralists' intransigence. It even provided a lawyer for the arrested strikers, who were acquitted.

(Despite finally winning many of their demands, a number of Aboriginal workers chose not to return to work and, with the assistance of McLeod, formed the Pindan Cooperative Mining Company in an effort take control of and work their traditional lands. The co-op acquired five pastoral properties, on which stock raising and tin mining took place. On Yandyerra Station, the workers established their own school, hospital and accommodation for old people. The founders and staff envisaged the scheme in either "socialist or communist terms". After a split among the Aboriginal members, one group joined McLeod to form Nomads Incorporated, which in 1971 purchased Strelley Station. McLeod left the CPA in the 1950s.⁶³)

It was not just the big struggles. Perth's communists in 1944 mobilised in support of Aborigines protesting in the suburb of Guildford against the army's takeover of a reserve and their removal to a camp without housing or sewerage. Bayswater and Midland Junction CPA branches backed protests against the evictions, organised by Aboriginal woman Mary Mordern, who was a member of the Modern Women's Club. This discussion group was set up by, among others, CPA member Katherine Susannah Prichard and involved several Aboriginal women. It regularly took up Indigenous rights issues.

The great significance of the Pilbara and other 1940s struggles is that they put Aboriginal rights on the national and international political agenda, and exposed to the wider Australian population just how severe were the federal and state authorities' racist restrictions on Indigenous people's civil and political rights. They inspired the later struggles and solidarity campaigns that would directly lead to the success of the 1967 referendum, and the modern land rights movement in the 1970s. ■

The 1940s: Communists Win Control of NAWU

Meanwhile, in 1946, a team led by CPA member George Gibbs successfully challenged the right-wing, AWU-aligned leadership of the NAWU in the Northern Territory. This new leadership was “determined to bring about equal wages and conditions for all workers and the abolition of discriminatory [federal] Aboriginal Ordinances” and changed the union’s rules to allow Aboriginal workers to join.⁶⁴ The response of federal Labor government officials in the NT was to hold a joint conference with the pastoralists, excluding the union, which reaffirmed the racist Aborigines Ordinance’s pay rates. In 1948, when the union applied to bring Aboriginal pastoral workers under its award, the Arbitration Commission upheld the racist arrangement the government had worked out with the pastoralists. In 1950, the commission again rejected equal wages for Indigenous pastoral workers.⁶⁵ The NAWU backed strikes by Aboriginal workers living in Darwin’s apartheid-like “townships” — from where they were ferried into town each day to work as domestics and labourers, then trucked out before the night curfew for Aborigines came into force. Murray Norris, a Communist Party member from 1932 until his death in 1986, was part of the NAWU’s new radical leadership. Writing in 1982, Norris remembered:

Early in 46 the first of the Aboriginal strikes took place ... I was sitting in the union office when I heard a stone drop on the roof. I had a look around and couldn’t see any kids about. A little later I heard another one on the roof so I figured that I had better take a better look. As I walked all around the buildings and at the back I heard the familiar sound “Eh”, the sound that an Aborigine makes when he wants to get your attention. I walked over to some long grass and hidden there were seven Aborigines. They told me that they wanted to talk to the union about striking. They wanted assistance and advice what to do ... I told them to hold on and went back to the union office. Frank Whiteoak, the Darwin organiser, was there so I told him about it and took him back down. Some of them knew him and he was the bloke they had really come to

see. They were too polite to tell me that they didn't know me. Frank took over and formed a strike committee with himself as adviser in the background ...

At that time male Aborigines were brought in from the tribes to do the work around town and provide labour for the "silvertails" — public servants and their wives. The male got six shillings a week and one meal a day for doing all the outside work around the house and garden, cleaning and burning the "Flaming Fury" [contents of backyard pit toilet]. The female did all the inside work; all the washing, ironing, looking after the children, all the house work and got four shillings a week and one meal a day. They were kept in Bagot Compound and Berrimah Compound and were brought into town each morning by truck and taken back in the evening. They were not allowed in town after dark except on Saturday nights for the pictures. They cleaned the streets and cut the grass etc. They told Frank what they wanted in a series of meetings and if I remember rightly it amounted to an increase in wages, more and better clothes and blankets, etc.

They set a day for the strike to start and it did. There were no scabs. After a couple of weeks the "silvertails" got so tired of looking at a mountain of unwashed clothing etc., that the administration gave in. They got the "magnificent" sum of two pounds a week and better food, more clothes and blankets. They were very happy. The union told them that they had to organise again and get better wages and conditions and a school for the children. Later they did this and got a school up to fourth grade. These things happened while I was down the southern end [of the NT] and I was kept informed by Yorky Walker, the secretary, and through the columns of the *Northern Standard*, the union's newspaper, which had got going again.⁶⁶

In 1947 Aboriginal workers at Berrimah Compound were demanding increased wages and better conditions, and an end to the practice of 60% of their pay being paid into a trust fund controlled by the government, the practice that led to the "stolen wages".⁶⁷

Murray Norris noted that the NAWU also continued to fight for the rights of Asian workers, which included those of mixed Asian and Aboriginal ancestry:

Then when Streeter & Male, the pearling people, came to Darwin and used it as their base during their pearling operations, they had indentured natives of Indonesia to work their boats and do the diving. We disagreed with this policy and demanded that they employ Aborigines and train them for the job and pay them proper award rates. We got no help from the Native Affairs Department, so when the company used some indentured labour ashore during the wet, we were able to take action, as indentured labour could only be used on ship. Once they came ashore and worked they had to be paid full award rates. That year, the May Day parade was led by over 200 Aborigines, who had just won a strike of their own, and the crews of the pearling luggers. We had

given them pride of place for the struggles they had taken part in and they were very proud. We were proud of them.⁶⁸

The confidence and militancy of Darwin's Aboriginal people continued to grow as they began to organise themselves with the assistance and encouragement of the NAWU and its Aboriginal leaders, which included Joe McGinness and his brother Jack. This was symbolised by an amusing account provided by Norris:

In 1948 ... a Yank luxury cruise ship came into the harbour to be moored. It was the ex-yacht of the king of Norway. The tourists had been told by the Administrator that they would be able to see a corroboree out at the Bagot Compound, however the Aborigines were on strike at the time and had decided not to cooperate. The wharfies took the lines and moored the ship ... [and] assisted in placing the gangway etc. One of the wharfies was Billy Rowe, a coal black man from Beagle Bay WA. Billy was a well built six-footer with a big black beard. When the Yanks came down the gangway, festooned with cameras, binoculars, timing gear, and what have you, they were dressed in Hawaiian shirts with palm trees and canoes and more maidens on the back. When they spotted Billy they trotted over to him and said, "say guy you are going to go corroboree for us this evening?" Billy roared, "Get away you yankee cocksucking bastards or I'll corroboree up and down your guts with both boots". It was like the retreat from the Philippines.

That evening they were taken out to the compound to see the corroboree but the Aborigines refused. "No more", they said, "we been on strike." The Yanks offered them money and their brightly coloured shirts but it made no difference. "We been proper sorry", they said, "that Administrator not been ask us, he been tell us, and we been on strike."⁶⁹

The support that the NAWU provided to the NT's Aboriginal people was reciprocated. In 1948, there was a successful six-week-long hospital strike:

Wonderful solidarity was shown by the Aboriginal workers to the union. The "silvertail" women decided to try their hands at strikebreaking and attempted to go to the hospital, but first the picket line was a bit too much for them and secondly the Aboriginal workers that were doing all their house work, walked out, when "their employers" tried to scab. As soon as the "silvertails" found that there was nobody at home to do all the dirty work, they quickly turned tail and went home. Then the Aboriginal workers, having taught their "white masters" a small lesson also returned to work.⁷⁰

A two-day sit-down strike occurred in November 1950, and again in January 1951, after NAWU officials made contact with leaders at the Bagot Compound, another Darwin apartheid-like "township". Strike leader Lawrence was sentenced to four months' jail for organising a march into Darwin. Lawrence had summed up their grievances: "We don't want one law for the blacks and another for the whites".^{71.*}

Lawrence was released on bail provided by the NAWU. Another leader, Fred Waters, was “deported” 1900 km to a settlement near Alice Springs.⁷² Federal minister for territories Paul Hasluck justified such repressive actions because “the strikes had been part of a communist plot for ‘general industrial disturbance’”. Attwood cites another senior official who declared that the strikers “were ‘part of [a] communist plan’ in which the Aboriginal ‘ringleaders’ were acting in accordance with the instructions of the ‘militant’ union led by [Yorky] Peel”.⁷³ Peel was the acting secretary of the NAWU and, although white, had been “embraced” as a member of the Aboriginal community.⁷⁴

In Murray Norris’ 1982 memoir, he describes the NAWU’s determined defence of Fred Waters, the exiled Aboriginal leader.⁷⁵

We had found over the years that when an Aboriginal became a leader or spokesman for his people he didn’t last long afterwards. He was either sent back bush or framed up on some charge and sent over to Delissaville, a so-called convict settlement over the [Darwin] Harbour. Sometimes they died in questionable brawls; later the participants in the brawl were given their freedom and sent back to their own country. So it became necessary to have a hidden leader, one who could get advice from the union and take it back to the nominal leaders and lead them from behind. Fred Waters became this hidden leader and he was a good one. At last the Native Affairs found out about him and took measures to get rid of him. They first expelled him from the Bagot Road Compound.

The NAWU immediately found Waters and his wife a place to stay and employed him as a carpenter at the union’s meeting hall until he was seized in November 1950 by the Native Affairs Department and shanghaied to Haasts Bluff, west of Alice Springs, as a “troublemaker”. NAWU president Norris, in Melbourne at the time representing the union in a court case, flew to Sydney and then back to Melbourne in search of a judge who might grant a writ of Habeas Corpus for Waters. Finally, after consulting with Jim Healy, the communist leader of the militant Waterside Workers Federation, and Idris Williams, another leading CPA trade unionist, Norris secured the free services of a friendly solicitor and barrister and appeared before the full High Court in an attempt to win Waters’ freedom.

As Norris described:

The government wanted to make sure of this one. Each department, Native Affairs, Administration, Interior etc., had their quota of QCs, barristers and solicitors. I was the only joker there without a wig. The case lasted two days and turned out as I expected. They ruled that I had no authority to bring a case before the court on behalf of an

* The exact months in which these strikes occurred vary in the accounts.

Aborigine. Under the law only the “protectors”, the Native Affairs, had this right, so they found against us. When I was going out of court the Clerk of Court stopped me with a bill of costs for some £666. I told him to send it to [Prime Minister] Mr R.G. Menzies, Canberra or Vestey’s Ltd. [the large British pastoral company, which became infamous for its later struggle against the Gurindji], who would be sure to take care of it. I never heard any more of it.

NT and WA CPA activists collaborated with their comrades in the capital cities and in other states, as well as with existing and new Aboriginal rights organisations. More than 30 unions protested the treatment meted to the NAWU’s Aboriginal organisers, and financial support was provided by state and federal unions, trades and labour councils and the ACTU. Murray Norris toured the eastern states to win support for the NT’s Indigenous workers, including an address to a meeting of 450 shop stewards in Melbourne. The tour was sponsored by the CPA-influenced Democratic Rights Council.⁷⁶

The tour was also strongly backed by CPA-influenced unions. The campaign forced the government to allow Waters to return to Darwin, as Norris detailed in his memoir:

I arranged a series of talks to suit every occasion, 10-minute talks for smoke-ohs, half-hour talks for dinner-time meetings, and anything from one to two hours for night-time meetings ... After six weeks of nearly non-stop speaking which included addressing the Federal Labor Party at Parliament House in Canberra, addressing all aggregate meetings of the Miners Federation, the miners put a car at my disposal and as I would finish one meeting I would hop in the car and go to the next one. All business would stop until I had spoken, then resolutions etc., and I would jump into the car and on to the next one. After a week in Queensland I had lost my voice and only a whisper would come out. I decided to return to Darwin. On the plane on the Monday, the stewardess gave me the paper and the big headlines were “Aboriginal Strike Leader returned to Darwin” ... He beat me back by two days.

Of all the fights the union had engaged in my time with them I think that this case and the first strike in ’46 were the ones to be proud of. Fred Waters showed his faith in the union and his courage when answering questions from the “presstitutes of the press”. I was informed that one question put to Fred was that, “The Administrator brought you back because you promised to be a good boy and not cause any more trouble”? Fred was about 48 years old; he said “What you mean boy? I’m a man and I’ll cause trouble till I die while my people want me”, and to a further question that the Administrator had let him come back, Fred said “That fella Administrator never let me out, he put me in, union got me out”. Some time after I had left the NT I was told by a Territorian that I met in Sydney that Fred had been framed for having a drink and

sent to Delissaville and killed in a “brawl”. I think that the leadership that he showed and the sacrifice that he made may have helped set in motion the struggle of the Aborigines that have taken place in the NT to this day.⁷⁷

The NAWU sent Aboriginal union organiser Jack McGinness to the 1951 ACTU Congress seeking support.⁷⁸ A direct product of the tours of NAWU activists was the formation of the Victorian Council for Aboriginal Rights (CAR), which was to play a key role in foundation of the Federal Council of Aboriginal Advancement. A meeting to discuss the Waters’ case was held on March 16, 1951, in the Melbourne Town Hall. It was sponsored by the NAWU and the CPA, and endorsed by Doug Nicholls. Out of that meeting, the CAR was formed.

Murray Norris summed up the period of the CPA-led NAWU:

We had a number of attempts to get award wages for Aborigines but always came up against the backward policy of the Native Affairs Department which, even though there was a Labor government in office, continued to make and carry out a policy that was not many years away from the slave days. In many cases it was no better than the slave days. These people called themselves “protectors”. If they had been truthful they would have called themselves by their proper name, “persecutors”. They were racists and carried out a racist policy, carried it out for the benefit of the employers, mainly the cattle station owners. This is now history, but a history that is being covered up with a lot of whitewash. I suppose that the history of the NAWU could be part of the history of the development of the Aborigines’ struggle for their place as people and all that means. We did as much as we could with the means available to us, which was very little.⁷⁹ ■

Woomera Rocket Range & the Maralinga N-Tests

During 1946 and 1947, the CPA opposed the federal Labor government's plan to establish, with the British Labour government, the Woomera rocket range in central Australia on an Aboriginal reserve because it would "make Australia a strategic base of imperialism", the planned "Atom and Rocket Bomb Tests [were] ... were probably the most inhuman methods of waging war" and because it jeopardised the future of the Aboriginal people there, who would be subjected to "further hardships".⁸⁰

The CPA's Melbourne *Guardian* on April 3, 1947, reported that a "rocket range protest meeting" was held in the Melbourne Town Hall. Speakers included Bill Onus, president of the Australian Aborigines League, who declared that "more money should be made available for Aboriginal welfare, instead of rocket ranges". Another speaker, Dr. Charles Duguid, noted that "the northern portion of the Aboriginal reserve which was to be taken over consisted of rich country which had long been coveted by big pastoral interests".⁸¹ The meeting was attended by 1300 people.

Jim Crawford, a playwright who had joined CPA in 1934 after being involved in the UWM in Cairns, Mackay and Brisbane, was a founder of the Roving Reds Revue Company, wrote the play *Rocket Range* in 1947. It highlighted the impact of "capitalism on Aboriginal society". It was rejected by the British Drama League festival as "ideological propaganda".⁸²

The CPA did not limit their agitation to public meetings and cultural dissent, but also advocated placing trade union "black bans" on the construction of the rocket range. Clearly the Labor government did not consider these as idle threats. In June 1947, the federal parliament passed the Labor government's draconian McCarthyite Approved Defence Projects Protection Act — drafted by H.V. Evatt — in direct response to the radical left's opposition to the Cold War military installations. The Act threatened hefty fines of up to £500 or 12 months' jail for any person who "by speech or writing advocates or encourages the prevention, hindrance, or obstruction of the carrying out

of an approved defence project”; Woomera was quickly declared such an “approved project”.⁸³

In June 1951, 900 people attended a public meeting in Melbourne Town Hall organised by the Council for Aboriginal Rights to protest the impact of the nuclear weapons tests on Aboriginal people. It was addressed by Dr. Charles Duguid and novelist and CPA member Alan Marshall.⁸⁴ ■

Torres Strait Islanders

In 1936, Torres Strait Islanders working on the Queensland Native Affairs Department pearling luggers went on strike. The strike's leaders were influenced by militant CPA members and CPA-led wharfies in Townsville and Cairns, where several Islanders had previously worked, and the CPA supported the strike. Dozens of strikers were arrested by the Queensland government "Protector" of Aborigines. The January 21, 1936, *Workers' Weekly* condemned the "terrorism" directed against the striking pearlers and reported that they were "pressing for the 'actual payment' rather than credit in the sponsored stores of the Aborigines Industries Board, a position of 'slavery in all but the name'". *Workers' Weekly* was the first newspaper to report on the strike, indicating it was in direct contact with the strikers. Inevitably, the issue of equal wages also became a protest against the dictatorial and racist Queensland Aboriginal "Protection Act" and the call for Commonwealth intervention was raised.⁸⁵

The CPA continued to pay special attention to the specific rights of the Torres Strait Islanders. In 1947, the party published a specific program for the Torres Strait Islands, written by Gerald Peel, a tutor for the CPA's Marx School in Sydney, with the assistance of Tom Wright, Fred Paterson in Queensland, and others. It was written, Peel reported, after an Islander visited the Sydney CPA office during WWII. Titled *Isles of Torres Strait: An Australian Responsibility*, it tailored many of the party's demands for Aboriginal rights to the maritime environment, putting a greater emphasis on Islanders' self-government of Torres Strait Islands and the sea industries. Harking back to the 1931 program, Peel proposed a "long-range program" including the declaration of the Islands as "an autonomous region within the Commonwealth, with sovereign internal rights for its people, including the right to secede".⁸⁶

Tribune ran a series of four articles beginning on February 28, 1948, written by Jean Devanny, which condemned the "shameful discriminatory treatment" resulting from the Torres Strait Islanders Act of 1939, which gave the government "Protector" "stand-over powers over a people who are as capable of running their own affairs as any equal number of whites. A difference in skin colour is made the excuse for

relegating to an outcast status a virile, highly intelligent and civilised community.” Fifty years before Mabo, *Tribune* urged the recognition of the Islanders’ “ownership and control of their territory and territory waters” and argued that the pearling industry “should be their collective property and should be developed by them on a cooperative basis”.⁸⁷

According to the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Marou Mimi, a 1936 strike leader who went on to become a long-term leader of the Murray Islanders, “hoping to advance the islanders’ cause ... flirted briefly in 1948 with the Communist Party of Australia, which led one Queensland government official to nickname him ‘old Stalin’”.⁸⁸

In 1954, CPA published a version of the 1947 program, titled *Let the Sun Shine!*, in several Islander languages and in English. Its main proposals were for “self-rule based on indigenous structure within Island communities”.⁸⁹ ■

Theory & Reality

In 1950-51, CPA member and NAWU organiser Jack McGinness and other Aboriginal NAWU members in Darwin set up the Half-Castes Progressive Association. Its goal was to exempt non-“full-blood” Aborigines from the provisions of the Aborigines Ordinance, because it permitted employers to refuse to pay full award rates to those subject to it.

This acceptance of the artificial, and potentially reactionary, racial division was a product of the confusion caused by the CPA’s continued acceptance of the flawed theoretical framework of Aboriginal people being an oppressed “nation”, rather than a racially oppressed minority within the Australian nation. In order to make sense of the 1928 Comintern theory, the analysis of the CPA distinguished between “tribal” Aborigines who supposedly continued to live traditional lifestyles, racially defined as “full-bloods”, and “proletarianised” Aborigines, who were so-called “half-castes” or of “mixed race”. Tribal Aborigines were an “oppressed nation”, whose oppression would be addressed by exercising their right to national self-determination, including the right to form independent republics in central and northern Australia, while “mixed race” Indigenous people were defined as a “national minority”, entitled to full economic, social and political rights.

Writing in a report to the CPA central committee in February 1947, Tom Wright explained the party’s thinking, which even then was in transition: “In our work we have endeavoured to impress on our members, and others who are working for the Aborigines, that the problem of ... half-castes ... is not the Aborigine question at all. One of the demands of the party is that the terms ‘Aborigines’, ‘Aboriginal’ and ‘native’ ... should not be applied to persons of mixed blood.”

While the party demanded full civil rights and “special measures for rehabilitation and assistance” (affirmative action in today’s terms) for persons of “mixed race”, Wright claimed that “tribal” Aborigines were not part of the “reserve of the proletariat”. “For the Aborigine [i.e. “full blood”] the main demands must be for ownership of their hereditary lands for each of the tribes [including full legal ownership of its minerals

and other resources], inviolable reserves, medical services, various forms of assistance to develop economic activities under their own control, etc.”⁹⁰

Wright wrote in the April 1949 issue of the *Communist Review* that CPA policy towards “tribal” Aborigines was motivated by the need to ensure their survival, as opposed to the goal of the government policy of “assimilation”, which aimed to gradually eliminate them. To that end tribal Aborigines “should not be deprived of any more of their land ... they should be given complete ownership and control of the land and all mineral, timber and other resources which should become the collective property of the tribe”. “Tribes ... must be treated as social units” and helped to survive as such.⁹¹

The CPA’s 16th National Congress in 1951 declared, according to the July *Communist Review*, “Justice must be done to the Australian Aborigines. In the Northern Territory and adjacent areas, tribal lands must be made secure for the surviving tribes and every aid extended them to develop their own life and culture. Full citizen rights must be extended to non-tribal Aborigines”.⁹²

Yet, such a clear divide had long ceased to exist, even in the remotest parts of central, northern and northwestern Australia. This fact was made abundantly clear by the historic Pilbara stock workers’ strike. The vast majority of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders — no matter what their racial heritage, their lifestyle or location — had become integrated to some degree into the national economy as part of the Australian working class. All Aboriginal people were oppressed on the basis of their visible racial characteristics and their particular lifestyles, which in many cases retained elements of their traditional land use, spiritual attachment to land and more communal attitude to property. At the same time, this did not invalidate the Indigenous people’s right to their land and its resources.

Their resulting powerlessness, due to systematic social, economic and political marginalisation, meant that they were much more easily super-exploited as a low-paid, casualised “reserve army of labour”, especially in Australia’s rural and outback areas, where the majority of Aboriginal people lived until the 1970s. Federal and state government policy was designed to maintain this situation on behalf of the big pastoralists and other rural capitalist interests.

However, this contradiction between theory and reality was being overcome, even before being formalised in the CPA’s program, as lessons were learned from its practical activity in the struggle for equality and citizenship rights, including the recognition of land rights and the demand for Aboriginal control over Aboriginal affairs. As CPA activists worked more and more closely with Aboriginal activists, it soon became clear that the call for “independent republics” — secession — received no substantial resonance, whereas the civil rights call for the restitution of the Aboriginal

peoples' legal right to land ownership was the more appropriate demand. It became clearer that, whatever theoretical terminology the party chose to put it in, Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders were a people who shared a common racial oppression, and as a result a growing common political consciousness, but were not a separate nation.

In September 1954, the *Communist Review* published "A New Stage in the Development of the Aboriginal People", which was based on a report by the CPA's Minorities Committee to the Central Committee. It reinterpreted the old line to fit the reality of the Indigenous people's racial oppression without, however, openly rejecting the national oppression framework. The CPA now considered all Aboriginal people an oppressed "national minority", in effect finally dropping the view that Australia's Indigenous people could secede and form a viable nation state:

The idea that the aborigines are still living as hunters and collectors has led firstly to an incorrect appreciation of the position of the Aborigines as a national minority. Today, the great mass of the Aborigines, full-bloods and half-castes, do not live in tribes, but on the outskirts and in the slums of big towns, on cattle stations, and on government and mission settlements ... A new national consolidation is taking place ... The old tribal identity is being replaced by new ties arising from common residence, common awareness of themselves as racially and culturally distinct, and, above all, from consciousness of subjection to common oppression ... The greater number of Aborigines today sell their labour-power on farms and cattle stations ... these Aborigines are workers, not nomadic hunters and collectors. It is the mass of the Aboriginal population — the Aboriginal workers and semi-proletarians — who should receive our attention in the first place, and our particular assistance should go to these most advanced workers who are moving into action.

The CPA should "fight against all attempts to split the Aboriginal people (into full-bloods and mixed bloods) ... and struggle for unity of all aborigines, whatever their physical make up". The struggles in the Pilbara and Darwin "showed that the urban and rural workers constitute the most advanced and militant section of the Aboriginal people, ready to fight in defence of their own interests ... a correct party leadership and cooperation from the white working class will lead to much wider mobilisation of these allies in the development of powerful struggle against capitalism, the common enemy."

The article indirectly conceded that the CPA's earlier approach of separate demands for "tribal" and "non-tribal" people echoed the state's racist policies. The party proposed that state policy be changed from one based "on the preservation of tribalism to one of the most rapid social advancement of the Aboriginal people ...

from a policy which accepts the less obvious segregationist and racist approach of the ruling class to one based on the understanding of the national developments among the Aborigines and the smashing of all obstacles to Aboriginal unity.”

The article noted: “A policy orientated on the mobilisation of the Aboriginal people ... requires much closer contact with the Aboriginal people, a searching out of those issues which the Aborigines themselves are seriously concerned about and ready to fight on ... Our basic demands for the Aboriginal ownership of reserves, the ending of discriminatory laws and the extension of full civic rights to the Aborigines, and the rapid raising of their living, education and health standards must be carried forward not solely by general agitation, but by struggle around day-to-day issues. Such a reorientation of policy will bring into struggle against capitalism thousands of powerful and militant allies”. The CPA’s 18th National Congress, held in April 1958, reaffirmed the main aspects of the policy.⁹³

The January 1962 *Communist Review*, reporting on the CPA’s 19th national Congress in June 1961, referred to Aborigines as a “national minority”, rejected the federal government’s policy of “assimilation” and instead argued for policy of “integration”:

As a first step, we call for full citizens’ rights, full award wages for Aboriginal workers especially in the pastoral industry, preservation of the remaining tribal lands and provision of land for those driven off the reserves, education and training facilities, and abandonment of racial discrimination, and the repeal of the infamous Aborigines Protection Acts, and encouragement to the Aborigines to establish their own committees to manage their affairs ... The Communist Party stands for the right of these magnificent people to decide on their own national development, including their right to establish autonomous regions if they so desire”.⁹⁴ ■

Struggles in the 1950s

The CPA's "reorientation" saw further activity in support of Indigenous struggles, continued efforts to win labour movement support for Indigenous people's rights and increased involvement in broad-based organisations committed to winning support for Aboriginal demands. "From 1955 onwards", moaned the ASIO document, "the CPA press gave much publicity to every incident involving the aboriginal people."

ASIO summarised the CPA's extensive activity:

This publicity included allegations of colour prejudice; appeals to trade unions to help aborigines both financially and politically; protests at evictions of aborigines from houses; "historical" articles; attacks on governments for implementing the policy of "full rights ..." too slowly; allegations that "wealthy squatters, pastoral companies and mining monopolists are furious at the advances made towards equal pay, education and other reforms"; allegations of "intrigue among public figures in Western Australia ... to smash Don McLeod, white leader of the Aboriginal cooperative in the Pilbara"; approval of strikes by aborigines; and the building, among communist-controlled trade unions like the Waterside Workers' Federation, the Miners' Federation and the Seamen's Union, of a campaign for full citizenship rights for all aborigines.

The February 27, 1957, *Tribune* reported the discovery of bauxite in Weipa, Cape York, and warned that "American-Australian monopolies are moving into Aboriginal reserves on the western side of Cape York Peninsula". "Any minerals found in those areas ... belong to the Aborigines and they must be developed by the government in the interests of the nation generally and the Aborigines in particular", *Tribune* declared.⁹⁵

The CPA and left unions also provided vital solidarity to the five-day strike and uprising that shook Palm Island reserve in June 1957 — the first strike waged on a Queensland reserve. The residents, fed up with years of brutal control by reserve authorities, rebelled against the particularly sadistic reign of Superintendent Roy Bartlem. Many residents had become aware of their rights after coming in contact with militant trade unions while working during WWII. Back on Palm Island, they

took control of the island demanding increased wages, an adequate meat supply, better housing and Bartlem's resignation. In response, the Queensland Labor government, with the assistance of the Menzies federal government, rushed a squad of 20 armed police to the island. With machine guns pointing at the beach, the strike leaders in manacles, and their families, were bundled aboard boats and "deported" to reserves across Queensland. *Tribune* condemned the Queensland Labor government's actions, and said the "rebellion" on the Palm Island "penal settlement" was a "thoroughly justified strike". *Tribune* called for a public inquiry into the outrage.⁹⁶

In 1956, a Western Australia parliamentary select committee chaired by independent Liberal Bill Grayden reported that Aborigines at the Warburton Ranges mission, who were among those affected by the Woomera rocket range and Maralinga N-tests, near the WA-NT-SA border were suffering severe malnutrition and starvation.⁹⁷ The first press reports of this crisis were published by *Tribune*. A broad Save the Aborigines Committee was set up in Melbourne which included the Council for Aboriginal Rights, church groups and civil rights groups. It held two large public meetings. Out of this campaign, the Victorian Aborigines Advancement League, which would become the Victoria FCAA affiliate, was formed, with Pastor Doug Nicholls as secretary.⁹⁸

The CPA continued to campaign against the use of Aboriginal land for the Woomera rocket range and the British atomic tests conducted at nearby Maralinga in 1956, and campaigned against the unjust 1958 jailing of famous Aboriginal painter Albert Namatjira.^{99,*}

As well, communists maintained the campaign for support for Indigenous people's rights in the unions. In 1956, the CPA-led Waterside Workers Federation called for the granting of "full civil rights for Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders". In January

* Alice Springs police charged Namatjira with supplying alcohol to Aboriginal people and he was sentenced to six months' jail with hard labour. He denied the charge and fought the sentence in both the Supreme Court and the High Court. Namatjira's legal costs were met by the Victorian AAL and the Victorian Council for Aboriginal Rights. His appeals were unsuccessful and the seriously ill painter was forced to serve two months of the sentence. "Namatjira was released from the Papunya Native Reserve on May 19, 1959, but appeared to have lost his will to live. He had lost his interest in painting and was in what appeared to be a state of severe depression. He accepted the offer of a small cottage at Papunya, but his condition rapidly deteriorated. He was admitted to the Alice Springs Hospital where he suffered a heart attack, and with the onset of pneumonia it was only a matter of hours before he died. Albert Namatjira died at the Alice Springs Hospital on August 8, 1959."¹⁰⁰ "The interest in Namatjira's case took an interesting form in 1961", reported ASIO, "with the production by the (Brisbane) New Theatre of a play *The Painter* written by CPA member Nancy Viola Wills."¹⁰¹

1957, the Victorian secretary of the Australian Railways Union (and CPA central committee member) John Brown publicly voiced opposition to British nuclear tests on Aboriginal land near Woomera, declaring that “if £1 million less had been spent on the rocket range and used instead to help the Aborigines, Australia would have more to be proud of”.¹⁰² ASIO complained that by 1957 trade union bodies such as the NSW Labour Council, the Melbourne Trades Hall Council and the ACTU had been “drawn into making public statements of use to the CPA” concerning Aborigines. ■

State-based Aboriginal Rights Support Organisations

The CPA also significantly increased its involvement in broad-based Aboriginal rights support organisations in most states. A number of key Indigenous leaders joined the party despite the massive pressure of the Cold War and the ongoing ideological competition with resource-rich conservative Christian do-gooders in these organisations.

One such leader was Faith Bandler, who was active in the Australian Aboriginal Fellowship (AAF) formed in Sydney in 1956. In 1951, Bandler and a young Aboriginal communist activist from Dubbo, Ray Peckham, were selected to attend the Youth Festival of World Culture in Berlin. The superintendent of the Aboriginal Welfare Board (AWB) refused to give permission for Peckham to leave the country. However, the Board backed down after protests were organised, supported by the Waterside Workers Federation and the Seamen's Union. Peckham's father Tom was active in the CPA-led UWM in Dubbo in the 1930s.¹⁰³ Bandler was a CPA member until around 1963.

Long-time FCAATSI leader from Queensland, Kath Walker (now better known by her ancestral name Oodgeroo Noonuccal) from Stradbroke Island, was another. According to her biographer Kathie Cochrane, Walker joined the CPA after the party sponsored anti-racist actions in Bundaberg.¹⁰⁴ However, she left in the late 1950s, becoming increasingly hostile to the party.

The AAF had been formed after objections that the older Aboriginal Rights Council was "dominated by the communists". Nevertheless, Faith Bandler, Len Fox and other communists played important roles in it. CPA-led unions, including the Waterside Workers Federation and the Builders Labourers, supported the Fellowship. Charles and Peggy Leon, an Aboriginal couple, were among the first AAF activists. Charles Leon was a builders labourer. Jack Horner, who went on to become a longtime non-Indigenous leader of the FCAATSI, also joined after returning from London and

getting involved with the WWF and the CPA-aligned New Theatre company. Also involved at the start was Grace Bardsley, who had become politicised while working for the NAWU in the NT when it was run by the CPA. She joined the party in 1941, but left later disillusioned with Stalinism. Irene McIlraith, a Jewish refugee from the Nazis, who had been active in the German socialist movement was also an early member.¹⁰⁵

Yet again the CPA's links with the world communist movement generated international support for the cause. During his sellout tour of Australia in October 1960, the famous African-American singer Paul Robeson wrote an article for the Soviet Tass newsagency in which he spoke out against New Zealand's discrimination against the Maori people and Australia's brutality against the Aborigines. He was introduced to Faith Bandler, who showed him a 15-minute film on the plight of the Aborigines in the Warburton Ranges. Robeson was so angry about what he saw he flung his hat on the floor and vowed to help bring international attention to the situation. He addressed a large reception in Paddington Town Hall, where he told the crowd: "The indigenous people of Australia are my brothers and sisters".¹⁰⁶

ASIO's 1962 document reported in great detail the so-called "penetration" of Aboriginal organisations by communists in this period:

- In Darwin, communists George Gibbs and Brian Manning helped establish "the NT Aboriginal Rights Council in 1962" (in fact, according to Manning, the NT Council for Aboriginal Rights was formed in December 1961) and were on its council, while every member of its executive was "a full-blood aboriginal".
- In July 1959 the NSW Aboriginal Australian Fellowship's elected office-bearers included "three persons who are or have been members of the CPA";
- In Queensland, the State Council for the Advancement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, formed in 1958, "increased its activities with CPA 'front' organisations like the Union of Australian Women and 'peace' organisations taking a greater interest in its activities". In July 1960, a conference of the council was held in Cairns, at which the Queensland state secretary of the CPA Edwin Bacon spoke. According to ASIO, the conference adopted a declaration that contained "statements of policy identical with those of the CPA concerning the aborigines". In August 1961, the council was split by a right-wing National Civic Council/Queensland Labor Party-aligned faction (which went on to form a pro-assimilationist, anti-communist outfit called the One People for Australia League, which included future Liberal senator Neville Bonner). As a result, "a CPA-penetrated executive was elected" to lead the council, and was re-elected in 1962.
- Also in Queensland, in 1960 a branch of the Aborigines Advancement League was formed in Brisbane "with CPA member Margaret Reiby Proud on its executive".

ASIO again noted the similarity of the league's program with that of the CPA. Proud was re-elected in 1961.

- In Victoria, the executive of the Council for Aboriginal Rights in 1962 included "three persons who are or have been members of the CPA". The council's president Barry Christophers and secretary Shirley Andrews were communists. The council in 1962 produced a booklet entitled *The Struggle for Dignity*, and "four out of the five contributors are or have been members of the CPA".¹⁰⁷ ■

Referendum Campaign Launched

The AAF began to circulate a petition calling on the federal government to hold a referendum to change the constitution in order to delete discriminatory clauses and to take over the states' powers to legislate on Aboriginal affairs — the demand that was finally realised with the success of the 1967 referendum. By the beginning of 1957, 10,000 signatures had been collected.¹⁰⁸

The launch of what would become the historic 10-year-long referendum campaign was a packed meeting in Sydney Town Hall on April 29, 1957, at which the AAF launched its mass petition drive to take over the states' control of Aboriginal affairs. (ASIO noted in 1962 that this demand was also “a plank in the CPA's policy platform for aborigines”.) Already in 1957, thousands of signatures had been collected and they continued to mount.

One of the key architects of the petition, along with Bandler, AAF president Bert Groves, Jessie Street (a well-known socialist and women's rights campaigner active in the ALP) and left-wing civil libertarian Brian Fitzpatrick, was Christian Jollie-Smith, a barrister and a founding member of the CPA and AAF legal adviser. (Jollie-Smith was only the second woman to be admitted, in 1924, as a solicitor in NSW. She died in 1963.) On the platform were veteran Aboriginal activists Pastor Doug Nicholls, Bert Groves and Bill Onus,* renowned Aboriginal opera singer Harold Blair,[†] and Don McLeod.

* Bill Onus had political and personal connections to the CPA. Margo Neale wrote a tribute to Bill's son, Lin Onus, the noted artist and political activist who died aged just 47 in 1996.¹⁰⁹ Neale wrote that Lin was the “only child of Bill Onus, a Yorta Yorta man from the Aboriginal community of Cumeragunja in Victoria, near the town of Echuca, and a Scottish mother, Mary McLintock Kelly ... [Lin's] political education was partly the consequence of living with parents who were politically active on a number of fronts, including a close association with the defamed Communist Party. They first met at a rally, and his mother was crowned Miss Communist Party 1947. 'It was from them that Lin gained his strong social conscience and need to fight for the rights of the underdog and the oppressed which can be seen in many of his later works'.”¹¹⁰

Faith Bandler recounted how Sydney's ALP Lord Mayor Harry Jensen backed out at the last minute: "When our forthcoming meeting had been rumoured to be a 'communist plot', Jensen notified our secretary, Irene McIlraith, that he'd be out of town on the night. This was to our relief as our invitation to him to chair had only been extended out of courtesy because he was lord mayor ... we were aware that we'd already been branded as a group of 'reds' at a time of constant political witch-hunts. Our telephones were tapped; our letters were opened".¹¹³ Around 2000 people attended, including 500 Aborigines, "an astonishingly large number at a time when the position of Aboriginal people in white society was not generally newsworthy and Aboriginal people had little reason to believe in the value of such an occasion".¹¹⁴ ■

† In 1949, ASIO's deputy director warned that "Harold Blair ... an Aboriginal singer who has received recent press publicity on account of his talent ... is being sponsored by a committee consisting of ... Vance Palmer (author), Margaret Sutherland (composer), John Lloyd (businessman). Palmer is regarded here as a suspected member of the Australian Communist Party ... Communist interest was apparent in the career of Albert Namatjira, the Aboriginal painter who received a great deal of publicity last year".¹¹¹ According to the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, John Lloyd and his wife Gwenda, both CPA members, beginning in 1945, provided Blair with accommodation in their home when he was in Melbourne. John Lloyd became his manager and organised his 1949 Australian tour. Gwenda tutored the young singer at night.¹¹²



Above: Lucy Eatock. *Below:* The Bankstown house barricaded by Unemployed Workers Movement members in which Alex Eatock was shot and arrested in 1931.





Left: 1947 poster of the campaign to stop the British rocket range in South Australia. Below: Members of the Aboriginal-Australian Fellowship march on May Day, Sydney 1959. The banner features Albert Namatjira, the famous painter who was jailed for breaching racist liquor laws.





Left: Cover of a pamphlet prepared by the FCAATSI Equal Wages Committee, financed by trade unions. The cover shows the 1964 Darwin May Day march in which 400 Aboriginal workers and family members took part. *Below:* May Day, Sydney 1965. Aboriginal members of the Waterside Workers Federation lead wharfies' contingent.





Top: Dexter Daniels (right) and Lupngagiari (Captain Major) arrive in Sydney to build support among the labour movement for the Gurindji struggle, 1966. *Above:* May Day march, Sydney 1966. *Right:* The 1967 referendum victory celebrations at Tranby College, Sydney; Faith Bandler in the centre.



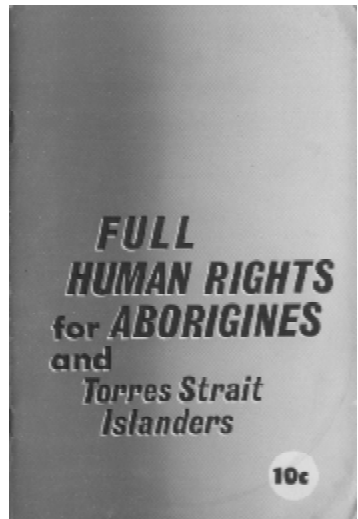
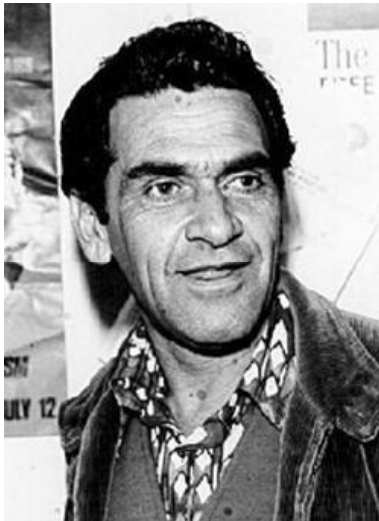


Above: Lupngagiari (Captain Major) addresses a stopwork meeting of building workers at the Australia Square site in Sydney, October 1966. Below: Members of the NT Council of Aboriginal Rights campaign in support of the Gurindji stock workers.





Above left: Joe McGinness in 1966. *Right:* FCAATSI president Joe McGinness, vice-president Doug Nichols and Miners' Federation FCAATSI delegate and CPA veteran Fred Moore, from the NSW South Coast. *Below:* Chicka Dixon. *Below right:* Cover of the CPA's 1967 program for Aboriginal rights.





Above: Students involved in the Freedom Ride, Walgett 1967. Below: Aboriginal Tent Embassy, 1972.



Federal Council for the Advancement of Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islanders (FCAATSI)

The formation of the Federal Council for Aboriginal Advancement (FCAA) at a conference of representatives of eight state-based Aboriginal rights and welfare organisations in Adelaide in January 1958 boosted the struggle nationally. (In 1964, the organisation was renamed the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders (FCAATSI).) However, of the 25 delegates present, only four were Indigenous.

The March 26, 1958, *Tribune* reported that the conference called for the complete “integration” of Aborigines into the life of the Australian community on the basis of equality — not of their “assimilation” which implies their disappearance as a separate racial and cultural group.¹¹⁵ Sue Taffe notes that “at the time of the Adelaide meeting, the Victorian Council for Aboriginal Rights was the hub of an informal network connecting individuals and organisations ... in various parts of the country. Many of those represented at the Adelaide meeting were affiliated with the Victorian Council and had been corresponding with its honorary secretary, Shirley Andrews, for many years ... Andrews was probably in contact with more people working either paid or unpaid in Aboriginal affairs than anyone else in Australia”.¹¹⁶

Attwood notes that “In its composition the Federal Council was broadly based but leftist nonetheless: Labor MPs in the form of [Gordon] Bryant, Don Dunstan and [independent Labor] Doris Blackburn ... communists such as [Barry] Christophers and [Shirley] Andrews, who also elected to the [executive] committee; and Christians who were not unsympathetic to the left, most notably [Stan] Davey, who became the Council’s secretary, the organisation’s most important office, which he was to hold for the next ten years ... The left’s influence could be said to be evident in the ‘five basic principles’ the Council adopted but especially the third — ‘All Aborigines to receive

equal pay for equal work and the same industrial protection as other Australians’ — and the fifth — ‘The absolute retention of all remaining reserves, with native communal or individual ownership’ ... Its first principle, which the Federal Council’s founders clearly regarded as primary, was ‘Equal citizenship rights with other Australians for Aborigines’ ... [The Council] immediately pledged itself to fighting for ‘equal rights for Aborigines and the repeal of all discriminatory federal and state legislation’.¹¹⁷

In 1961, Joe McGinness, the former NAWU activist from Darwin, now a leading member of the Cairns branch of the WWF, the Cairns Aboriginal Advancement League and a member of the CPA, became the president of FCAA, a post he held until 1978 (apart from one year). Faith Bandler and Ray Peckham also became leading FCAA leaders. Non-Indigenous communists were also leading members in many state organisations, notably Barry Christophers and Shirley Andrews in Victoria and Len Fox in Sydney, together with left-wing Labor Party members, such as MPs Les Haylen and Gordon Bryant. CPA-led or -influenced trades unions, including the Waterside Workers Federation, the Builders Labourers Federation and Building Workers Industrial Union, provided invaluable support and funds.

In October 1962, another meeting in Sydney, this time organised by FCAA, “relaunched” the petition — amended — as a national campaign. Chaired by Gordon Bryant MHR, the audience of 150 included unionists who had travelled from Newcastle and Wollongong and Aboriginal speakers included Joe McGinness, Kath Walker, Davis Daniels and Monty Moloney.¹¹⁸ Moloney was president of the Redfern All Blacks rugby league club and a CPA member. Ninety-four separate petitions — 103,000 signatures — had already been presented in federal parliament. Campaign committees were set up in each federal electorate. The conference appointed Shirley Andrews as the national coordinator of the petition drive.¹¹⁹ Kath Walker embarked on a national speaking tour.

Attwood points out that the petition’s architects were well aware that mere formal equality could not eliminate racial oppression and that affirmative action would have to be fought for:

When the 1962 petition was being drafted [Shirley Andrews] confided to Brian Manning, a fellow Communist Party member: “If all Aborigines become full citizens overnight, and they’re not entitled to any special financial aid, they would be expected to start from a position behind the lowest paid of other workers ... and repealing the legislation without providing for the immediate future would mean hardship for many Aborigines.” Winning “equal rights”, Andrews realised, was merely the first step. “In addition to removing all discrimination and causes of inequality”, she asserted, “special assistance to make up for the disabilities suffered in the past is also necessary ... Only

a ... large and well-planned scheme will solve present problems and enable Aboriginal people to attain an equal standard of living with other Australians.”

This recognition led the Federal Council to reject a proposal that it should advocate the repeal of Section 51 (xxvi) [of the Australia constitution] — which was what the original Fellowship [AAF] petition urged — and opt instead for the amendment ... to delete the words “other than the Aboriginal race in any state”.¹²⁰

By 1965, the campaign had the support of the federal ALP, the ACTU and the Australian Council of Churches. Hundreds of thousands of signatures were presented to federal parliament. The presentation of petitions by local MPs was now daily, even PM Robert Menzies in 1963 had to table one from his constituents in the Liberal bastion of Kooyong. The pressure was such that Menzies agreed to meet a delegation of Indigenous FCAATSI leaders. Following the meeting, the PM offered the delegates drinks. Kath Walker bluntly told him, “You know, Prime Minister, where I come from, you would be put in jail for this [offering booze to an Aborigine]”.¹²¹

Even as public support gathered pace, Menzies and then Prime Minister Harold Holt continued to resist the holding of a referendum, in particular on the question of amending the Section 51 (xxxvi) of the constitution that would allow the federal government to make special laws for Indigenous people, and to override state laws. ■

Union of Australian Women

The CPA-led Union of Australian Women was very active in the campaign. The UAW, which had its origins in the Modern Women's Club and later CPA-led women's organisations, consistently agitated for Indigenous people's rights. The UAW affiliated to the FCAA/TSI. Several Indigenous women activists, including CPA members Louise West (NSW) and Gladys O'Shane (Queensland) and non-communists such as Pearl Gibbs (NSW), Kath Walker and Celia Smith (Queensland), Dulcie Flower (NSW) and Gladys Elphick (SA) were among its leaders. Gladys O'Shane twice was a delegate to UAW national conferences in Sydney. Other Indigenous women active in the UAW included Pam Young, Queensland editor of the UAW's journal *Our Women*, in which she recorded: "Cairns has a large Aboriginal population and the UAW has many Aboriginal women members. They speak openly of their love for the UAW, the warm genuine friendship and feeling of belonging". When she visited the Cairns branch on one occasion, "a car load of women drove 40 miles from Mareeba to attend the UAW branch meeting, and husbands came also to discuss enthusiastically how to build the UAW and the Waterside Workers Women's committee".¹²²

According to Harry Stein, yet another (non-Indigenous) CPA activist in the Sydney Indigenous rights movement, Gladys O'Shane had been active in north Queensland in the Coloured Peoples' Association and later helped form the Indigenous people's rights movement in Cairns. She became involved when "she saw Aboriginal men shanghaied with very little reason to penal reserves". Gladys' husband Patrick was a militant wharfie and it was through the wharfies' general strike in 1948 that her political education began, joining the union's Women's Auxiliary and addressing strike meetings.¹²³ Gladys and Patrick O'Shane joined the CPA in 1959. Gladys died suddenly on December 29, 1965.

The UAW joined forces with the left unions to provide important backing to the struggles of Indigenous communities. In 1960, the UAW and the Newcastle Trades Hall Council supported the demands for better amenities for residents involved in a rent boycott at the Purfleet mission, just outside Taree. A Newcastle Trades Hall

Aboriginal Advancement Committee was established. One of the residents, Horrie Saunders, was evicted as an example to others. The Newcastle THC asked the renowned communist lawyer Fred Paterson (the first communist elected to an Australian parliament, who sat in the Queensland parliament in 1944) to defend Saunders. Horrie Saunders toured trade union meetings and workplaces in Newcastle and Sydney. Another Indigenous leader of the struggle, Marjorie Maher, also addressed workers' meetings, stressing that the struggle was not simply about poor housing but also against the racist provisions of the NSW Aborigines Protection Act, especially the dictatorial powers granted to mission managers.¹²⁴ In 1964, the UAW in NSW also campaigned against the outrageous jailing in Walgett of two Aboriginal children, aged 9 and 10, for stealing \$3 worth of crayons and toys from the Anglican Church. The boys were eventually removed from their parents and made state wards.¹²⁵ ■

The ‘Hopevale Flogging’

In 1958, the Cairns Aboriginal Advancement League, an affiliate to the FCAA, was formed; Gladys O’Shane was president and Joe McGinness was secretary. The league’s formation was encouraged by the Cairns Trades and Labour Council. Prior to the formation of the league, Indigenous people regularly took cases of racism and abuse to the TLC, which then raised them with the Queensland TLC in Brisbane and with the Queensland government. The TLC “was the only white organisation that showed concern over reported cases of injustice”.¹²⁶ The event that sparked the creation of the Cairns Aboriginal Advancement League was the racist sacking of a taxi driver. At the Cairns TLC meeting at which the sacking was discussed, Indigenous members of various unions present, as well as some Cairns residents also there, agreed that an organisation to fight for wage justice, and against police attacks and the racist Queensland laws was needed.¹²⁷

The Cairns league mounted a high-profile campaign in response to the April 1961 flogging of a young Aboriginal inmate, Jim Jacko, by Pastor Eric Kernich, superintendent of the Hopevale Lutheran Mission north of Cooktown. Jacko was punished simply for being in a relationship with a young women inmate without permission. They were penalised with an order to work for two weeks without pay. They “went bush” in protest. When they returned, Kernich ordered Jacko’s brother to beat Jacko with a cane. He refused, so Kernich himself, in front of assembled inmates, viciously struck Jim Jacko’s bare back with the cane between six and 12 times. The young woman had her hair cut off. Jacko was sentenced to exile on Palm Island. On the day that he was to leave Cairns for Palm Island, league member Tiger O’Shane liberated Jacko and placed him in hiding in another league member’s house. Despite an intensive search by Cairns police, he could not be located (however, this did not stop Jim Jacko taking part in a boxing tournament at the Wharfie’s Hall).¹²⁸

The Cairns league and the FCAA launched a campaign for a government inquiry into the “Hopevale flogging”. The league organised public meetings, distributed leaflets and won support from other organisations, including trade unions, TLCs, federal and

state ALP MPs and Aboriginal rights organisations in other states. The campaign forced the Queensland government to institute a judicial inquiry. A delegation led by Gladys O'Shane went to Hopevale for the hearing. It included representatives of the Townsville TLC, the BWIU, WWF and other unions, as well as federal ALP MP Tom Uren. Jim Jacko and the Cairns league was represented by former CPA Queensland state MP Fred Paterson. The inquiry found that Kernich's actions were "inexcusable". It was the first time such a challenge against the mission authorities and Queensland Act had been successful.¹²⁹ The Hopevale case was also the fledgling FCAA's first national victory and it boosted the organisation's credibility amongst Indigenous people.

Referring to the Hopevale case, and a similar case in Mareeba in 1962, McGinness observed: "Without the support of the trade unions and a few parliamentarians who believed in the principle of a fair go, it's extremely doubtful whether any of the cases reported by the League to the protection authority would have got to the stage where a public inquiry was held, followed by action of some sort to punish offenders."¹³⁰ ■

Other Campaigns

The FCAA also campaigned against discrimination in social welfare payments. CPA member Shirley Andrews led this campaign on behalf of the FCAA. At the time the FCAA was formed in 1958, the only social security benefits that Aborigines were eligible to on equal terms as white Australians was child endowment, unemployment and sickness benefits. “Nomadic” Aborigines were not eligible for any benefits whatsoever. In 1960, Andrews wrote an article, “Social service benefits still denied to Aborigines” which was widely distributed by the FCAA. In 1963, Joe McGinness led a campaign for the tuberculosis allowance to be extended to Aboriginal sufferers.¹³¹

Shirley Andrews was also the inaugural chair of FCAA/TSI’s Equal Wages Committee, set up in 1963, with Barry Christophers its secretary. According to Taffe, Christophers was “the driving force of the committee” and was secretary until 1973. The committee organised FCAATSI challenges to federal and state government discrimination in wages and social welfare payments in the streets and courts.¹³² The committee’s first action was to produce a leaflet, “Equal wages for Aborigines: There must be an end to discrimination”. More than 20,000 copies were distributed, funded by eight trade unions.¹³³ Union support for the work of the Equal Wages Committee grew through 1964 and 1965. ALP socialist Dick Scott of the Sheetmetal Workers Union became committee president and the committee met free of charge in the BLF meeting room in Melbourne. In mid-1965, 11 unions were represented on the committee. Barry Christophers pushed the case for equal pay with the ACTU and union secretaries. The work of the committee played a large part in the 1965 ACTU-NAWU equal pay test case for NT pastoral workers.¹³⁴ ■

The Redfern All Blacks

What ASIO hair-raisingly referred to simplistically as communist “penetration” of Aboriginal organisations is more accurately described as the everyday interactions and interconnections that communists had developed with Indigenous communities over many decades. A snapshot of its depth is captured in Jackie Hartley’s wonderful essay on the Redfern All Blacks football club, entitled “Black, White ... and Red”.¹³⁵

The All Blacks is the all-Aboriginal rugby league club and community institution that began in the 1940s. Fortuitously, the casualised and seasonal work patterns imposed on rural Aboriginal people favoured the All Blacks. Players from country NSW would come to the city and find jobs in the factories of Redfern and Waterloo during the football season, then return to the bush in the off-season to work on the sheep stations. By the 1960s, with the structure of rural industries changing, there was an “exodus” to capital cities. The All Blacks became more than a sports club but offered support and assistance for Aboriginal youth and was an important component of community organising.

The club was singled out by the FCAA in 1962 as a model of Indigenous self-organisation. It reported that the All Blacks “had started out with football and now expanded into culture [and] employment assistance”.¹³⁶ The All Blacks was the only sports organisation financially affiliated to the FCAA.

The All Blacks held dances at the Redfern Town Hall jointly with the NSW Aboriginal Australian Fellowship. Fellowship members attended All Blacks games to deepen its links with the community. All Blacks secretary Ken Brindle declared that the “Redfern All Blacks and the Fellowship were the only two organisations the Aboriginals had any respect for”.¹³⁷ The president of the club was Monty Maloney, a CPA member, Brindle and several other club executive members were also office-bearers or delegates in the Fellowship and the FCAA. At the 1962 FCAA conference, Brindle and Maloney ensured “that the views of urban Indigenous people were not neglected, drawing attention to [the ban on selling alcohol to Aborigines, which directly affected the club] and to the police ‘persecution’ suffered by members of the club”.¹³⁸

Maloney, a builders' labourer, was elected in 1961 to be an international delegate of the Building Workers Industrial Union (BWIU) to attend the 12th anniversary celebrations of the German Democratic Republic. Upon his return to Australia, Maloney joined the CPA. As a delegate to the 1962 FCAA conference, he urged Indigenous people to "go to the working class if you want help. You will never get it from the politicians" and argued in the Fellowship's newsletter for mass struggle and participation in organisations of people who believed in a "fair go".¹³⁹ In 1963, Maloney and fellow CPA trade unionist Ray Peckham, began to publish the *Aboriginal Worker*, which appealed to Aboriginal workers to "play an active part in your union".

It was because of the involvement by activists like Maloney and its links with the Fellowship and the FCAA, that ASIO kept the All Blacks under surveillance. But in 1964, ASIO was forced to place the team on a list of organisations on which "insufficient information is held to assess the extent of communistic involvement within them".¹⁴⁰

Hartley notes that the All Blacks "were aligning themselves with a radical position, one which had been adopted by the AAF [Fellowship], FCAA and the CPA ... The All Blacks ... were part of a movement towards a different conceptualisation of their place within the wider society — integration. While assimilation presumed a loss of identity in order to receive the full benefits of citizenship, integration was premised on the retention of identity yet acceptance in society. The presence of the All Blacks within the South Sydney Junior league was, in effect, integration in action. The team retained their own identity, the Indigenous community had their own club, but were a part of the mainstream competition. Yet, the All Blacks' challenge to assimilation through integration was not merely symbolic, but also a central part of the club's stated aims. The All Blacks resolved to stimulate 'the interest of young Aborigines in every form of social activities, and their complete integration in the general community life'. The term was deliberately repeated in an 'Aims and Statements' document of the team a year later".¹⁴¹

Another prominent Redfern resident was Chicka Dixon, a militant wharfie and leader of the Aboriginal struggle.¹⁴² Dixon was politically close to the CPA and an activist in the CPA-led Waterside Workers Federation. (There are conflicting accounts of how close, with some sources saying he was a party member and others that claim he did not actually join.) Dixon left the Wallaga mission for the city in 1945. By 1946, Chicka told the *Maritime Workers' Journal* in 2001¹⁴³ "I was sneaking off to meetings of the Aboriginal Progressive Association at the Ironworkers' Hall [the FIA at the time was controlled by the CPA]". "Oh Chicka, don't go down there, they'll call you Red', my mother said. "Well, I said, they've been calling me black for years." After a stint as a builders' labourer, he got a job as a wharfie. "That's where I learned the politics. The

Communist Party Moscow-liners were masters of organising. And I learned a lot about other people's struggles ... I was in a bit of a shell before that. I thought we were the only people in the world discriminated against. Then I started to hear about Greek political prisoners (we walked off on that issue), the Vietnam War (repeatedly walked off on that) and South Africa (walked off on that, too) ... That was my political education ... They taught me how to organise. We'd be talking politics all the time. It was second nature."

The fifth national conference of the FCAA held in Adelaide in 1962 "drew up plans for ... a national campaign to mobilise the Australian people in support of the demands of Aborigines" including a petition to state and federal governments "demanding: (i) Repeal of discriminatory legislation. (ii) Full wages for Aborigines. (iii) Full rights for Aborigines. (iv) Equal education opportunity. (v) Ownership of reserves and community development".¹⁴⁴ ASIO claimed that this policy reflected the degree of influence exercised by the CPA in the Federal Council and its affiliated organisations, citing its similarity to the program outlined in the January 1962 issue of the *Communist Review*. ■

Trade Union-Indigenous Alliances

Support from left-wing trade unions was essential for the campaigns of the FCAA/TSI. In 1959 and in 1962, unions and TLCs affiliated with FCAA (mainly CPA-influenced) moved resolutions to the ACTU Congress calling for action on equal pay and removal of all forms of discrimination. In September 1963, the ACTU unanimously adopted its first policy on Indigenous workers' rights, which included an end to wage discrimination, direct payment of wages and welfare payments to Aborigines and an extension of relevant workers' compensation laws to Indigenous workers.¹⁴⁵ The motion was moved by a former NAWU militant Ron Hancock, who was at the congress as a Building Workers Industrial Union delegate. The resolution read in part: "The Congress declares that it is the natural right of the Aboriginal people to enjoy a social and legal equality with other Australians ... the Aboriginal people while forming part of the Australian population are at the same time distinct, viable national minorities entitled to special facilities for self-development".¹⁴⁶

Unions also provided essential financial assistance. In April 1963, the FCAA asked the Waterside Workers Federation to help pay the fare to get Joe McGinness down from Cairns for an FCAA AGM. Later that year, the WWF affiliated to the FCAA after its federal council was addressed by McGinness. In 1964, the WWF donated £100 to FCAA and another £300 for scholarships for Aboriginal youth. FCAA NSW secretary Faith Bandler wrote to the union to thank it for the donations: "The main support for the FCAA in this struggle comes from the trade unions and among the trade unions the WWF has a special place in my heart because it has so often been the first and most generous in response to our appeals".¹⁴⁷

Celia Smith, a leader of the Brisbane-based Queensland Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, reported in the council's October 1970 newsletter that "the recent Watersiders All-Ports Conference decided on a nation levy of \$1 a member to raise a fund to be administered by the union to

advance our people. Our council has received a wonderful donation from the Brisbane wharfies — \$1300.” In the November–December 1971 newsletter that she noted that the WWF had donated \$10,000 to the Gurindjis.¹⁴⁸

WWF support went beyond simply doling out money, but involved genuine collaboration (not surprising considering the fact that several leading Aboriginal activists were or had been associated with the wharfies’ union). Eighteen months later, Bandler wrote to the WWF requesting a meeting “so that trade union efforts may be directed to vital areas where less politically advanced organisations cannot be expected to help”. Bandler was invited to address the union’s federal officers within days of getting the letter.¹⁴⁹

This support overwhelmingly came from the CPA-led or -influenced unions, as Sandra Bloodworth explains: “... in 1965, the list of affiliates to FCAATSI is dominated by a range of unions — the BWIU, Builders Labourers, the Australian Railways Union, the metal industry unions such as the boilermakers and sheet metal workers, Miscellaneous Workers’ Union, Teachers, plumbers and engine drivers, and some state trades and labour councils ... The Seamen’s Union Federal Office files reveal ongoing activity from the early sixties around such issues as equal wages, opposition to mining on Aboriginal land at Gove, support for the Gurindji, affiliation to FCAA/TSI, donations for things such as a car for use in North Queensland by Aboriginal activists, and the sponsorship of Aboriginal children as seamen ...”

Lambie McBride, an activist in Queensland Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, remembers: “The unions were very much in support of us, all the unions, especially the Builders’ Workers [sic], and the Seamen and the Waterside Workers.” Hazel Mace, another Queensland Indigenous activist, added: “Those Waterside Workers ... people would go there and they would listen to what people had to say ... they would address the men in their lunch hour [about] discrimination and that”.¹⁵⁰

However, this support did not just flow from the top leaders of left unions but also came from the branch and rank-and-file levels. As Bloodworth reveals:

In 1957, the *Eveleigh News*, published and distributed by the Eveleigh Loco Central Shop Committee in Sydney, ran an article “New Deal for Aborigines” as its main feature. It began, “No ‘dinkum’ Aussie can deny that one of the most shameful features of our Australian history has been the tragic treatment of our Aborigines”. It called for the federal government to be given powers to find solutions, which could be established by referendum, and referred to the AAF meeting in Sydney Town Hall ... It reported that the petition was “already being circulated and being solidly supported in many railway workshops”. The Shop Committee was negotiating for a speaker on

the issue to address the workshops. The Carriage Workshop Committee had organised a successful “Black & White” concert, and issued an appeal for financial support for the Fellowship. Donations totalled 50 pounds ... The writer did not resile from making the reader feel uncomfortable: “Although we all have a very bad conscience about our inhuman behaviour towards the original Australians, our authorities continue to deny them economic, social and political equality, & enforce their existence as an underprivileged minority in their own country.” They referred to the “plight of the tribal Aborigines”, and the fact that “vast areas of tribal lands have been violated by the establishment of rocket & nuclear weapon testing ranges” at Maralinga. The article concluded with a reminder that “The Aboriginal people are Australians — much more so than we are ourselves — they deserve all the help and assistance we Railwaymen and others can give them in their fight for full citizenship.” ... In 1957, in response to a call by the NSW Trades and Labour Council to hold workplace meetings to protest the nuclear tests, Eveleigh held a mass meeting on 13 September and sent off a telegram to Prime Minister R.G. Menzies.

Bloodworth also notes that individual branches of the WWF “such as Grafton, NSW South Coast, Sydney, Melbourne, Port Adelaide, Albany, Fremantle, Bowen and Cairns, at times affiliated to FCAA/TSI, demonstrating the advanced political consciousness of waterside workers”. In another example of rank and file support, Bloodworth discovered “an undated loose sheet in the front of a minutes book of the Combined Union Shop Committee at the Williamstown Naval Dockyards [in Melbourne] which begins 27 September 1956, ‘Tulloch’, a CPA member, is recorded as raising the issue of racial discrimination. He wanted the shop committee to ask the Metal Trades Federation to approach the government to enact anti-racial vilification legislation. Another worker, Wilson, raised the demand of full citizenship rights for Aborigines, and moved that ‘Stewards who have not had a mailing on this matter to do so and raise these [questions] on the shop committee’.”

Bloodworth continues: “Small committees and conferences in which either individual unions were involved at an official level, or trade union and CPA activists were prominent, played a role in establishing the basis for unity between Aboriginal struggles and increasing numbers of unions ... The friendly relations between Aboriginal groups and some unions is reflected in things such as the FCAATSI holding its conferences in the BWIU hall in Sydney in the early sixties. Other organisations which gave some support such as churches were far more reluctant to be openly identified with the Aboriginal activists’ political activities. So when the student ‘Freedom Riders’ caused a stir in Walgett in 1965, they were hastily thrown out of the church hall in which they had hoped to sleep”. The extent of the Indigenous-labour movement

alliance that had been created was illustrated by the attendance at the 11th annual FCAATSI conference in April 1968. Of the 42 affiliated organisations, 11 were trade unions, four were trade union councils and 23 were Indigenous organisations.¹⁵¹

Through its direct links with the labour movement, the Indigenous people's rights movement could also call on the power of working-class action in many situations, as was previously illustrated by Joe McGinness' collaboration with the trades and labour council in north Queensland. Another example was provided by Chicka Dixon:

I was in bed and three young Aborigines knocked on the door about nine o'clock at night. They told me that a very dignified hotel down in George Street [in Sydney] wouldn't serve Aborigines. I decided to go down and find out. I took the blackest fella with me, walked in, and asked for a schooner of beer for my friend and schooner of lemonade for myself. The bartender said: "I'm sorry ... We won't serve Aborigines." "Well that's quite all right, [Chicka replied], tomorrow evening I'll have 300 waterside workers up outside your joint here. Nobody is going to get in because we are going to blacklist this hotel. Then I'll go to the Trades and Labour Council and the Liquor Trades Union to pull the barmaids out." Well, he did complete [about] face. It's a remarkable thing, blacks are welcome down there now!¹⁵² ■

The NT Council of Aboriginal Rights & the Gurindji ‘Walk Offs’

In 1964, with ACTU backing, the AWU and NAWU (no longer led by the left, which lost control in 1952, although the militant wharfies’ section remained solidly left-wing) unsuccessfully negotiated with the NT pastoralists for full award conditions for Aboriginal stock workers. In 1965, the NAWU applied to the Arbitration Commission. The pastoralists hired none other than John Kerr, QC, who at the time was an NCC-aligned Labor Party member, to represent them.

The federal Liberal government intervened to prevent any award being made which would cover pastoral work on Aboriginal missions and settlements. Kerr put the racist argument that Aborigines — despite having been the backbone of the industry’s workforce for generations — still needed training, because “a significant proportion ... is retarded by tribal and cultural reasons from appreciating in full the concept of work”. The commission’s March 1966 decision, while accepting much of the bosses’ and government’s arguments, also reflected the pressure of public opinion in support of the Aboriginal people. In a “compromise” ruling, the commission ruled that all NT Aboriginal stock workers were to receive equal pay — but not until December 1968.¹⁵³

FCAATSI denounced the decision. During the case, FCAATSI unsuccessfully sought to make a submission in support of the workers, held demonstrations outside the hearings, produced a pamphlet for trade unionists exposing the racism against rural Indigenous workers, and sponsored a campaign to deluge the commission, the pastoralists and the leader of the federal Country Party with letters.¹⁵⁴

The focus of the struggle again shifted to independent activity of the Indigenous people themselves, and again the CPA, left unionists and the socialist left offered vital support. The NT Council for Aboriginal Rights (NTCAR), in which communists George Gibbs and Brian Manning were leading members, played a crucial role. Gibbs was secretary of the NAWU’s militant waterside workers’ section, whose executive had a CPA majority. Manning was also a wharfie and secretary of the CPA branch. The

Darwin waterside workers had maintained their strong support for Aboriginal people's rights that began in the 1920s.

In 1962, "Wild Bill" Donnelly, a CPA activist, travelled to Sydney to report to the Waterside Workers Federation conference on the local campaign to defend Peter Australia, an Aboriginal wharfie who had been jailed for 12 months for giving an Aboriginal friend a glass of wine. The campaign was successful and Peter Australia was released by federal cabinet after serving four months.¹⁵⁵

According to a 1965 ASIO document¹⁵⁶ the CPA had "a powerful influence" in the NTCAR, with not only three committee members being in the CPA but also its Aboriginal assistant secretary Terence Robinson "was reliably reported to be a member [of the CPA] in 1963". At the 1964 Darwin May Day march, the NTCAR organised more than 400 Aboriginal workers and family members to march behind placards that proclaimed "Equal work, equal rights, equal pay". A photo of the contingent, taken from the CPA's *Tribune* newspaper, adorned the cover of FCAATSI's Equal Wages Committee's pamphlet, *The Facts on Wage Discrimination Against Aborigines*.¹⁵⁷

Angry at the Arbitration Commission's March 1966 decision to delay equal pay for three years, and disappointed by the NAWU's poorly prepared case, Aboriginal activists in the NT Council for Aboriginal Rights (NTCAR) sought to take matters into their own hands. Dexter Daniels, an NTCAR activist and NAWU organiser, and his brother Davis, secretary of NTCAR and an orderly at the Darwin Hospital, discussed the situation with Gurindji leader Vincent Lingiari, who just happened to be in the hospital at the time. Reluctantly, NAWU secretary Paddy Carroll agreed to the Daniels and Lingiari proposal for a protest strike, but was opposed to it involving more than one station, as Dexter Daniels was calling for. On May 1, 1966, Aboriginal stock workers at Newcastle Waters station went on strike.¹⁵⁸

The NTCAR now organised to push the action beyond the "token" protest acceptable to the "moderate" NAWU leadership and extend the strike to the larger cattle stations. As Brian Manning pointed out, "the main exploiters of skilled Aboriginal labour were the large absentee landlord holdings, [such as] Vestey's Wave Hill and Australian Estate's Victoria River Downs, [at] the time the two largest properties in the Northern Territory". The NTCAR decided "to canvass the feelings of workers on the larger properties by sending a deputation on a fact finding tour to get first-hand information. Nick [Pagonis], a Greek wharfie took some leave from his job and with Dexter Daniels and Clancy Roberts, also a Roper River Man and Rights Council committee member, set out to tour the major stations: Victoria River Downs, Wave Hill and Helen Springs, another Vestey's property south of Katherine ... At Wave Hill they found Vincent Lingiari ... [who] was eager to take action ... At [Victoria River

Downs] Dexter spoke with traditional owner and leader 'King Brumby', he too was prepared to join the strike."¹⁵⁹

In June 1966, the Gurindji people began their historic "walk-off", establishing a strike camp on the banks of the Victoria River near the Wave Hill settlement.¹⁶⁰

Brian Manning and the Darwin wharfies organised ongoing supplies for the strikers, making at least 15 return trips from Darwin on appalling roads. "There were a number of Darwin wharfies who rotated to run supplies to the Gurindji over the next few months. Paul Patten, Barry Reed, Nick Pagonis, Jack Phillips and George Gibbs made more trips than anyone else".¹⁶¹ The very first two-day run was made by Manning, Dexter Daniels and Robert Tudawali, the Aboriginal actor who starred in Charles Chauvel's film *Jedda* and the television series *Whiplash*. Tudawali was vice-president of the NTCAR.

The NTCAR also worked to raise the profile of the strike, which was receiving coverage in the national press "thanks to noted Australian author Frank Hardy's contacts in the media and letters the Council for Aboriginal Rights had sent to unions seeking financial support ... Frank Hardy was active in Sydney gaining publicity and organising press conferences".¹⁶² CPA member Frank Hardy chronicled the events in his book *The Unlucky Australians*.¹⁶³ Negotiations dragged on during the wet season, and the NTCAR threatened to pull every worker off every station when the wet broke.

The CPA, through the Actors Equity and other left unions, sponsored a speaking tour of the southern capitals in October 1966 by Dexter Daniels and Lupgnagiari (also known as "Captain Major"), a Gurindji strike leader from the Newcastle Waters station. FCAATSI organised a national campaign in support of the strikers. The Waterside Workers Federation's Sydney branch hosted Lupgnagiari on a trip to Brisbane and Townsville, while Dexter continued to address job meetings in Sydney before their return to Darwin after about four or five weeks.¹⁶⁴ The FCAATSI Equal Wages Committee appealed for support and left-wing unions and TLCs responded, providing considerable financial support throughout the strike. The Australasian Meat Industry Employees Union declared a black ban on handling cattle from Newcastle Waters and Wave Hill.¹⁶⁵

In March 1967, the Gurindji moved en masse to a place in the centre of their land, Daguragu, or Wattie Creek. With the help of Hardy, the workers drafted a petitioned Governor-General Lord Casey for the return of most of the Wave Hill pastoral lease, which was in the hands of the giant British corporation Vestey's. To nobody's surprise, Casey refused the request.

The NTCAR provided a brick-making machine, building and roofing materials and a water pump. Unions down south also donated building supplies and a Toyota

truck. Brian Manning was elected by Darwin wharfies to attend the Waterside Workers Federation's All Ports Conference in Sydney. "My contribution to the conference was to report on the Wave Hill walk off with reference to the active support by Darwin Waterside Workers in maintaining supplies and to highlight the problem of the Gurindji claim for some of their land and their decision to take some back by fencing it. The conference decided to recommend to the rank-and-file members, a \$1 per member national levy to support the Gurindji claim for their land. This raised \$17,000, which became the Gurindji 'war chest' in their fight for land."¹⁵⁶ Frank Hardy wrote a series of articles on the Gurindji struggle in the *Australian* in 1970. On National Aborigines Day 1970, more than 500 people filled the Teachers Federation Auditorium in Sydney to hear Hardy give an "impassioned" speech urging continued support for their demands. A "Save the Gurindji" committee was formed out of the meeting.¹⁶⁷

When the federal government offered a lousy eight-square miles for a settlement, the Gurindji continued their land occupation. They were still there in 1972, when the Whitlam Labor government was elected with a promise to legislate in favour of land rights, and a land grant was finally given to the Gurindji at Wattie Creek.¹⁶⁸

Throughout the strike, *Tribune* carried regular reports on the widespread solidarity and support for the Gurindji struggle, often written by Brian Manning and Frank Hardy. In the July 17, 1968, issue alone, there were reports of workers at a Brisbane meatworks meeting and donating \$800 to the strikers, a 1000-strong march in support in Melbourne and another of 100 in Adelaide.¹⁶⁹ CPA activist Jack Munday, who led the militant NSW Builders Labourers Federation, recounted that "in the 1960s, the Black movement started to become the second biggest issue after Vietnam ... We knew ... that racism was deep-seated and might be found among our own members, but we decided to fund some [Gurindji people] to come down and speak to us, and acquaint our members with the details of their struggle. We organised demonstrations and talk-ins. These actions were remarkably successful, given the obstacles in our way".¹⁷⁰

While the Gurindji struggle is often referred to as the birth of the "modern land rights movement" — and it clearly was the struggle that made many white Australians aware of the importance that the demand for the recognition of Indigenous people's prior legal right to the ownership of their lands — the call for land rights had long been a central demand of the unbroken movement for full civil rights. Heather Goodall learned from Jack Campbell, a veteran leader of the NSW Indigenous people's struggle, that Aboriginal people living in the Salt Pan Creek squatters' camp in south-west Sydney would travel into the city in the late 1920s to spruik to the crowds at Paddy's Market and in the Domain: "*Of course* they was callin' it land rights. 'Why hasn't the

Aboriginal people got land rights?’ they said. ‘The Aboriginal’s cryin’ out for land rights.’ They was askin’ for Aboriginal land, for the land they was *on!* That’s when them whites was chuckin’ ‘em off. There was places around, 35 or 40 acres, 60 acres, that Aboriginal people was on, growin’ potatoes, pumpkin, corn ... But the white settlers went into ‘em, they’d just run their cattle through their crops, knock it down, destroy it! ... Those old fellas, they were pushin’ ... for land rights ... and to break up the Aboriginal Protection Board”.¹⁷¹ Land rights were fundamental to the long struggle of the people of the Cumeragunja reserve, and to the support they received from the left throughout the 1920s and ’30s.

As CPA documents cited previously in this work show, the Australian left and the organisations it has led or influenced long supported “land rights”. For example, in 1962, during the agitation surrounding the closure of the Lake Tyers Aboriginal reserve in Victoria, the Australian Railways Union demanded that the settlement be given to the Aborigines. The Lake Tyers campaign was supported by the AAL and the Victorian Council for Aboriginal Rights. The VCAR helped organise the residents and their petition to the Victorian parliament. The VCAR pointed out that the closure of the reserve would repeat the loss of other reserves and “leave the Aborigines utterly dispossessed in Victoria”.¹⁷² In May 1963, a march was organised led by Joe McGinness, Doug Nicholls and other VCAR leaders to “Save Lake Tyers”, but also linked the struggle to other land rights campaigns of the times, such as those at Yirrkala and Mapoon. The 1964 FCAATSI annual conference heard speakers from Lake Tyers, Cumerugunja, Mapoon and Yirrkala, and who began to network together, “as a result” notes Attwood “the perspectives of local Aboriginal leaders shifted as they learned of the parallel struggles of others. They increasingly saw Aboriginality in national terms.”¹⁷³

The 1963 ACTU Congress adopted a policy which included: “Congress further declares that there should be an enquiry into the allegations concerning the removal of Aboriginal communities from their traditional lands at Mapoon, North Queensland, the closing down of the settlement at Lake Tyers, and threatened removal of Aborigines at Yirrkala, Gove Peninsula, NT, in the interest of foreign investors which lands have been regarded as inviolable Aboriginal lands ... Congress believes that where Aboriginal lands have been violated completely adequate resettlement and compensation should be provided”.¹⁷⁴

Leading member of the Victorian Council for Aboriginal Rights and CPA member Barry Christophers, in response to dispossession of the Yolngu people at Yirrkala in 1963, stated on behalf of the VCAR: “Aborigines have an inalienable right to security of land tenure of tribal lands which may not be superseded by any mineral rights ... In circumstances where ‘mining rights’ have already deprived Aborigine populations of

territory, e.g. Mapoon, Weipa etc., adequate compensation for loss of land and continuing payment of royalties [should] be granted to the people concerned".¹⁷⁵ ■

The Freedom Rides

Meanwhile in the cities, the Indigenous people's rights movement was winning the support of an important new ally — radicalising university students. The most famous of the early student actions was the 14-day Freedom Ride through rural NSW in February 1965 organised by Sydney University's Student Action For Aborigines (SAFA), and modelled on the US civil rights movement's actions of the same name. As Boughton notes, while the Freedom Ride is now a respected part of "official" Australian history, at the time the *Bulletin* magazine and many major newspapers, as well as the Liberal and Country Party MPs mounted a fierce anti-Communist attack on the movement, using material directly supplied by ASIO.¹⁷⁶

SAFA was formed after left-wing Sydney University students organised a concert and rally in July 1964. Five hundred students turned up to hear Charles Perkins and Gary Williams, the first two Indigenous students ever to attend the university, urge equal rights for Indigenous people.¹⁷⁷ The speakers also included Ron Hancock, a BWIU leader and a director of the Tranby Aboriginal College, and Alf Clint, the radical Christian socialist general director of Tranby. The rally organisers were Charles Perkins, members of the CPA and the heavily CPA-influenced Labour Club, and other left-wingers. These included Pat Healy, whose grandfather was Jim Healy, famed communist leader of the WWF, Hall Greenland, at the time a member of the ALP Club and later a prominent Trotskyist activist, Jeannie Lewis, the famous 1970s folk singer. The founding meeting of what was to become SAFA, on July 20, 1964, was called by Charles Perkins, CPA student Brian Aarons, Marxist lecturer Ken Buckley and lecturer in government Peter Westerway, whose links with Channel Seven ensured that the "Freedom Ride" revelations of rural racism gained extensive, damning TV coverage.¹⁷⁸

About a quarter of the students who joined SAFA president Charles Perkins on the historic trip were young CPA members, Boughton estimated.¹⁷⁹ According to Curthoys, "just over a third of the students were from the organised left. The largest group came from the Labour Club, some of whose members were in the Communist

Party, or its youth organisation, the Eureka Youth League”.¹⁸⁰ Many of the students also had family members who were or had been active in the CPA and were in part radicalised by that, including Ann Curthoys, then a CPA member whose mother Barbara was also active in the CPA, UAW and the Newcastle Trades Hall Aboriginal Advancement Committee. Four student members of the ALP, who “leant towards the Trotskyists”, including Hall Greenland, also joined the Freedom Ride.¹⁸¹

The aim of the action was to expose the continued segregation and the appalling living conditions under which Indigenous people lived, in shanty towns and on reserves and missions, in country towns in the “deep north” of NSW. The trip was filmed by a TV camera crew and the graphic scenes of “Jim Crow-like” segregation and racist violence stunned the country. “In the ensuing public debate”, reported historian Ann Curthoys in her 2002 address at the National Maritime Museum, “urban public knowledge of racial discrimination grew, some soul-searching went on in the country towns, racial segregation was challenged and in some cases ended, and alternative ideas of inclusion, equality and full citizenship rights were much debated. Along with many other events and campaigns, the Freedom Ride contributed to the holding and passing of the referendum of 1967 which gave the Commonwealth government the power to legislate specifically for Indigenous peoples and which symbolised a desire for a new deal for Indigenous people”.¹⁸²

Interestingly, while the Freedom Ride has gone down in history for exposing rural segregation, in his book Harry Stein pointed out that this was not the first such action. In July 1964, as a *Tribune* reporter, he took part in a trade union delegation to Walgett, one of the towns that would become notorious during the Freedom Ride: “The Aboriginal population and other citizens were seething with anger at the jailing of two children charged with stealing toys valued at a few shillings. Aged nine and ten, they were placed in a cell facing the street and their mothers could see their arms through the cell bars and hear them crying to be taken home. The trade union delegation had flown to Walgett to investigate the jailings.” The delegation and Harry Stein’s *Tribune* reports detailed the discrimination against Aborigines that occurred in the clubs, pubs, pools and picture shows. Aboriginal women were barred from employment in the town’s shops and offices and a majority of Aborigines, one in three of the Walgett population at that time, “lived in deplorable conditions in shacks outside the town”.¹⁸³

Curthoys adds that the 1964 delegation of five trade unionists, representing three unions (BWIU, BLF, WWF), included two Aboriginal workers: Alan Woods from the BLF and Jim Hassen from the WWF. They met with the mothers of the boys and with community activists, including three important local Aboriginal activists. They were Harry Hall, a member of the Australian Workers Union, George Rose, also an AWU

member and a CPA activist, and Mavis Rose, George's partner. The union delegation addressed a meeting of 100 Aborigines, who decided to form the Walgett Aborigines Progressive Association (APA), with Harry Hall as president and George and Mavis Rose also playing leading roles.¹⁸⁴ Those connections laid the basis of the Freedom Ride's successful actions in Walgett. On February 15, the Freedom Riders joined 350 locals to picket the Walgett RSL for its racist exclusion of Aborigines. George Rose was one of the speakers.¹⁸⁵

As expected, left unions offered support. The WWF offered the Freedom Riders a £100 donation and the use of a PA system, which was turned down by Charles Perkins, who was "anxious to deflect any charges of communist influence".¹⁸⁶ Following violent attacks by racists on the protesters in Moree, a stop-work meeting of Seamens Union members in Sydney expressed support for the students' "courageous exposure of the oppression and segregation levelled against the aborigines in NSW towns", and a mass meeting at the Chullora railway workshops unanimously voted to congratulate the Freedom Riders.¹⁸⁷

Tribune, the CPA's weekly newspaper, gave the Freedom Ride wide coverage. Noel Hazard, *Tribune* photographer, covered the events in Moree. In one front-page editorial, *Tribune* praised the students for their "historic ride and their political skills and maturity". "The resultant wide public discussion in NSW will greatly help the already powerful development of a nationwide movement for full rights for Aborigines" and promised that communists would maintain "a firm and consistent fight in support of the basic struggle of the Aboriginal people themselves".¹⁸⁸

In subsequent months, students returned to the country towns to support less-publicised ongoing struggles by Aboriginal communities. In August 1965, the Walgett APA organised protests against the apartheid policies of the local picture show and successfully "desegregated" the cinema. In the face of the mobilisation of the community, Harry Hall and APA leaders were allowed to purchase tickets and sit in the formerly "whites only" section. Emboldened by their success, the APA moved against similar practices in the town's pubs. On August 27-29, on the request of Harry Hall, a delegation from Sydney that included Charles Perkins and prominent Indigenous trade unionists and/or CPA members Ray Peckham, Chicka Dixon and Jack Hassen (Dixon and Hassen were part of a five-member delegation from the WWF Aboriginal Committee), participated in a number of attempts to openly break the "colour bar", as well as holding public meetings. ■

1967 Referendum Success

Between 1965 and 1967, the pressure of the mass petition drive, and the now historic Gurindji struggle and Freedom Rides, undoubtedly helped tip mass support in favour of Indigenous rights to such a degree that the federal government could no longer ignore the referendum demand. On March 1, 1967, PM Holt finally relented and introduced a bill to change the constitution by referendum to repeal section 127 (which excluded Aborigines from being counted in the census) and to amend section 51 (xxxvi), which would empower Canberra to override racist state laws and implement affirmative action for Indigenous Australians.

Once the federal election date was announced, “Vote Yes” committees were formed in every state. Joe McGinness and Gordon Bryant were joint national directors of the “Vote ‘Yes’ for Aboriginal Rights” campaign. Indigenous activists fanned out across cities and the countryside, with the strong support of the left of the labour movement. Activists addressed large union stop-work meetings, union journals campaigned for a “yes” vote and “throughout the month of April, *Tribune*, the Communist Party weekly, urged its readers to vote ‘yes’”.¹⁸⁹

On May 27, the referendum passed with a massive overall 90.77% majority, and a majority in all states. Doug Nicholls declared that while the overwhelming vote was “a great occasion . . . it was just the beginning”. FCAATSI’s Gordon Bryant concluded the day after the victory: “The vote is an overwhelming endorsement of the view that it is time for material action. The government cannot hide behind constitutional inhibitions, nor can it hide behind a faith in public apathy. This vote represents a great national demand for action”.¹⁹⁰ FCAATSI activists were under no illusion that the formal passage of the constitutional changes would end discrimination. As council president Joe McGinness wrote to supporters in June 1967: “Winning the referendum is an important step forwards but it is only a first step . . . the government is showing no hurry to legislate for us on education, housing, wages, trade training, land grants and many other things we need”.¹⁹¹

The mass media and the education system to this day present the passing of the 1967

referendum, with a massive “Yes” vote, as something that took place in a vacuum, as though one day the conservative government suddenly woke up to the need to address the injustices suffered by Australia’s Indigenous people. Yet that historic indication of white Australia’s support for equality did not drop like manna from heaven. It was the culmination of decades of hard-fought struggles by Indigenous people, their own organisations and allies — with communists black and white playing a vanguard role at every stage — which swung public opinion and laid the groundwork for the emergence of the new phase of independent Indigenous political activity.

In a February-March 1967 article in the *Australian Left Review*, CPA Queensland secretary Ted Bacon summarised how this “new stage in the struggle [had] been reached”. Indigenous people were in the past “broken into isolated groups, without much public understanding or sympathy” but now they were “beginning to get the mass support they need”, with the NT struggles and the Freedom Rides helping to build this growing awareness. The “nationwide movement” had “thrown up a core of capable, devoted Aboriginal and Islander leaders” and the formation of FCAATSI had been a “historic step towards resolving the difficulties of regional and political differences, and of bringing all the disparate elements in the movement together around a commonly agreed program of aims and action”. FCAATSI had helped to develop the new national indigenous leadership by its “persistent and successful efforts to draw Aboriginal and Islander leaders into positions of responsibility”, and successfully won the support of the trade unions.¹⁹²

The positive results of the CPA’s long-term commitment received a backhanded compliment from an unlikely source not long after the referendum. In Cabinet Submission No.92, May 15, 1968, the rabidly anti-communist federal Aboriginal Affairs minister W.C. Wentworth argued for a federal government Aboriginal policy by warning: “Hesitation in formulating a policy could have quite serious repercussions for us, both internally and internationally. Communists are devoting great efforts to capturing Aboriginal organisations, and unless we have an alternative to offer, they are likely to succeed. They plan both to develop an ‘American Negro injustice’ image and to focus the hatred of Asian peoples upon Australia”.^{193,*} ■

* ASIO’s files reveal that the federal government was so concerned about the CPA’s influence that it refused to allow the entry of Professor Fred Rose to the Groote Eylandt Aboriginal Reserve for academic purposes. On the advice of ASIO head Charles Spry, federal cabinet on May 9, 1968, refused access on the basis that: “Rose is a declared communist who has for many years been living and working in East Germany. The government is not satisfied that the implications of the presence of Rose in the Aboriginal Reserve for a period of some months would be limited to objective academic research.”

‘Full Human Rights for Aborigines & Torres Strait Islanders’

On the theoretical level, the CPA continued to reinterpret its 1931 position to fit the reality of Indigenous people’s *racial* oppression. In 1963, the CPA produced a new draft policy on Indigenous people’s rights, kicking off a long reassessment of policy that would not be finalised until four years later — which spanned a period of intense political activity around Indigenous people’s rights. The draft declared: “We must reject Assimilation ... Stripped of pretence it means in effect the elimination of Aborigines as a people through enforced absorption into the general population of Australia ... Assimilation would destroy what they have given to mankind as well as to deny them the fundamental right of all people to preserve their identity and develop along their own lines ... Assimilationist propaganda cannot disguise or solve the basic cause of the problems of the Aborigines, denial of fundamental rights”.¹⁹⁴

However, the CPA’s continued theoretical confusion between *racial* and *national* oppression remained. The February 1963 issue of the *Communist Review*, in an article by A.L. entitled “The Aboriginal National Minority”, produced this convoluted attempt to reconcile the two: “[In other countries], national minorities are usually restricted to well-defined regions of a country. In these circumstances, self-government or even autonomy from a majority population is a simple concept. In Australia the national minority, although linked by family and other ties, is scattered in groups throughout the length and breadth of Australia. This does not alter their circumstances as a national minority, but it does introduce the practical necessity of some modification in the usual demands and requirements of a national minority. The Aboriginal people must decide this question themselves ... wherever possible greater self-government in local government affairs would be quite practicable and in some regions ... political control by the inhabitants ... is quite possible.”

In June 1967, the CPA's 21st Congress adopted the new document, entitled *Full Human Rights for Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders*. It stated that Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders remain "oppressed national minorities. This is emphasised, not contradicted, by the fact that the great majority of them are poverty-ridden labourers. The high unemployment, sickness and illiteracy rates among them, their generally substandard housing and education, their virtual exclusion from most skilled trades and professions are the direct result of official discrimination against them as peoples".¹⁹⁵

The document recognised that systematic racial oppression meant that "the great majority [of Indigenous Australians] have been converted into underpaid, underprivileged workers ... Many are casual, underpaid labourers living on the fringes of towns and cities ... Th[eir] problem is a twofold one: the problem of workers suffering exceptionally bad conditions, and the problems of peoples fighting for the right to exist as such."¹⁹⁶ In other words, 180 years of state-sanctioned racial oppression had served to socially confine Indigenous people to a super-exploited strata of the working class — a reserve army of proletariat.

And it decisively dispensed with the racially based "tribalised"/"non-tribalised" division, stating that "all who identify themselves as Aborigines or Islanders, and are accepted as such, should be so regarded".¹⁹⁷ The program recommitted the CPA to support for, as its title so clearly attested, *full human rights* for Australia's Indigenous people, which included the restoration of land rights, and Indigenous control of Indigenous people's affairs and communities. While still couched in terms borrowed from the CPA's Comintern-imposed 1931 "national oppression" framework, the document did not demand for "*national self-determination*", i.e. up to secession to form an independent nation-state, as an appropriate or feasible solution to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders' *racial* oppression. It declared that: "The Aborigines and Islanders have the same right as any other nationalities to exist and develop as peoples, and to full social equality with other Australians."¹⁹⁸

(Interestingly, in its overview of the party's evolving position on the Indigenous people's struggle, the 1967 program skips all mention of the 1931 "Aboriginal republics" position. It moves directly from its opposition to "all forms of racialism" at its foundation to the "publication in 1939 of Tom Wright's pamphlet *A New Deal for the Aborigines*", which represented a "big step forward" in the party's thinking.¹⁹⁹)

The document repeated the 1963 draft's rejection of the official policy of "assimilation". "Stripped of pretence, it means in practice the elimination of the Aborigines as a people, through enforced absorption into the general population."²⁰⁰ The CPA counterposed to this genocidal policy that of "integration":

[A] policy which upholds [Indigenous people’s] right to exist as separate peoples ... This means that Aborigines and Islanders should be free to live as they choose, either as members of the general Australian community, or in their own autonomously controlled communities, according to individual choice. In other words, this policy provides for the minorities to be integrated into the Australian community without losing their identities.

For such a policy to become a reality, Aborigines and Islanders should have inalienable possession of their remaining tribal areas, of the lands now set aside as Government or Mission Settlements, or of better land where this is unsuitable, ownership of mineral and other natural wealth located on their lands, and economic aid to enable them to develop rapidly as modern communities.

Preservation and development of their own cultural heritage is a necessary condition for the progress of any community of people. The beliefs that will develop, forms of organisation, ways of doing things, languages, family and community relationships should be determined by the Aboriginal and Island peoples themselves.

The rights of the Aboriginal and Island peoples to full citizenship, equal wages and other award conditions, together with such special aid as may be needed to enable them to enjoy equal rights, and also to exist and grow as distinct national minorities, are fundamental.²⁰¹

The document identified this struggle as a central priority of the Australian working-class movement:

Those who benefit chiefly from the wage-robbery of Aboriginal and Island workers and from the theft of Aboriginal lands are the big (mostly) foreign pastoral and mining concerns. It is the power of these and other monopolies over state and federal governments that stands in the way of the liberation of the Aborigines and Islanders, prevents abolition of the backward state of life forced on them and denies them land ownership and control of their own affairs.

The struggle for Aboriginal and Islanders’ rights should be regarded as an important aspect of the whole political struggle in Australian, not a matter for a few wellwishers, but one to be taken up by all progressive people, all true patriots.

The majority of the Aboriginal and Island peoples has been converted into a particularly oppressed section of the working class. Their economic problems are therefore the direct concern of the working class and its unions. Their problems as oppressed national minorities are also the concern of the working class, which is called upon by history not only to emancipate itself but, in so doing, to help emancipate all other sections of the people.²⁰²

The document recognised that a new generation of Indigenous leaders was emerging:

“The movement for Aboriginal rights has begun to assume a new quality in recent times. It is becoming an organised, growing *mass* movement, in which capable Aboriginal representatives are increasingly taking leadership ...”²⁰³ ■■

‘Black Power’

Ironically, the development of this new generation of young, assertive militant black leaders in the late 1960s and early ‘70s, inspired and influenced by the worldwide rise of Third World liberation movements, the Black Power and Native Americans’ rights movements in the US, and the international youth radicalisation that accompanied the growing movement against US imperialism’s invasion of Vietnam, led to a decline in the CPA’s weight in Indigenous people’s rights movement. A damaging internal split in 1968, which resulted in the more Stalinist members of the party leaving, weakened the CPA’s influence in key left-wing trade unions. On the other wing, the growth of the youthful far-left parties critical of the CPA’s Stalinism and reformism reduced its attractiveness and weight on the left.

In the post-referendum years of FCAATSI — 1968 and 1969 — more politically conservative Indigenous leaders, led by Kath Walker and Charles Perkins — with the covert encouragement and assistance of the Coalition federal government and its agencies, as ASIO documents have revealed — made use of the demand for Aboriginal control of Aboriginal affairs to win the support of some radicalising young “Black Power” leaders and demand the end of FCAATSI’s “domination” by “white” communists and “do-gooders”.

Of course, this was an oversimplification of the situation. The influence of the CPA was not the result of “whites” dominating the “blacks” in FCAATSI, but primarily the product of a close and long-term alliance between communists — black and white — and non-communist Indigenous leaders (of course, not without its tensions). But as Jackie Hartley points out, Ken Brindle, the respected All Blacks secretary and FCAATSI leader, “In his arguments against Charles Perkins’ demand in 1968 that CPA members resign from the FCAATSI Executive, Brindle stressed that he was always careful to ‘tread the centre path’”.²⁰⁴

In 1969, FCAATSI split and the conservative-led faction formed the all-Indigenous National Tribal Council. After the split, both organisations declined in influence, although FCAATSI’s 1972 conference in Alice Springs attracted 350 people,

predominantly Indigenous.²⁰⁵

Of course, it is likely that the CPA alienated and frustrated some of the younger, more radical Indigenous leaders, and drove them into the arms of the conservatives, by sometimes resorting to bureaucratic and underhand methods to maintain its positions, tactics that were so prevalent in the labour movement, left and right. It is also true that some in the CPA did not fully appreciate the importance of the central demand of “Aboriginal control of Aboriginal affairs” — or “Aboriginal self-determination” as it was more often termed — for the radicalising new generation of Indigenous leaders.

Nevertheless, the collaboration between socialists — inside and outside the CPA — and the Indigenous people’s rights movement continued, and the new movement leaders, knowingly or unknowingly, were directly influenced by aspects of the legacy of the left and working-class militants’ long championing of the Indigenous people’s struggle for justice, equality and land.

Foley provides a succinct summary of the social and political conditions under which this new generation of leaders arose, and of its defining political approach, which has misleadingly — as becomes clear in this quote — been described as Aboriginal or black “nationalism”:

In the late 1960s and early 1970s a dynamic new indigenous political movement arose from the slums of Redfern where the black population had dramatically increased in a mass exodus from the rural reserves (concentration camps) after the 1967 Referendum. The Koori population of Redfern had risen from 2000 in 1965 to more than 20,000 by 1969, and from this dynamic “ghetto”, revelling in a new-found political and social freedom, emerged a new phase of the Koori movement ... The important difference between this new younger group and the older Aboriginal leaders of the day was that the new group had a diverse range of local and overseas inspirations and influences. These included the Gurindji struggle, Perkins’ Freedom Ride, Malcolm X, the Black Panthers in America, Ho Chi Minh and the Vietnamese struggle for independence, the African National Congress (ANC), Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO), Franz Fanon and Mao Zedong, to name a few.

Parallel developments in the more politically sophisticated Koori community in Fitzroy, Melbourne, had seen the emergence of the term “Black Power”. It began when the Aborigines Advancement League’s Chairman, Bob Maza, and the organisation’s first Koori Director, Bruce McGuinness, invited Caribbean political activist, Dr Roosevelt Brown to a conference at the League in March 1969. Brown clashed verbally with Pastor Doug Nicholls and the Melbourne media had a field day ... [Black Power] was interpreted by the press to be the equivalent to violent revolution and the establishment

of black dictatorships ... The Redfern/Fitzroy "Black Power" groups were also conscious of the "winds of change" sweeping through Africa and other parts of the colonised world and saw themselves and the Koori situation in the context of de-colonisation. Consequently one of their major slogans was "self-reliance" which meant they were dedicated to creating a new form of Koori community organisation; one which was first and foremost Aboriginal-controlled.

The new type of Koori organisation was to be created as a result of Koori people themselves defining the needs, problems and solutions of the Koori community. Then Kooris themselves set about alleviating those problems in ways which were uniquely Koori and which ensured that the resultant organisations were controlled by the Koori community. The role of the white supporter became one of taking direction from the "real" experts on Koori community matters, i.e. Koori community members.

This new form of organisation was the vanguard of the black political uprising of the early 1970s that culminated in the historic and politically brilliant Aboriginal Embassy protest of 1972. The dramatic proliferation of Aboriginal community-controlled organisations (legal services, health services, women and children's services, housing cooperatives) in that period both highlighted the political principle of self-determination espoused by Koori political activists, as well as challenged the pre-conceived notions of potential white supporters.²⁰⁶

In a more detailed essay, Foley defines the "Black Power" movement as the "loose coalition of individual young activists who emerged in Redfern, Fitzroy and South Brisbane in the period immediately after Charles Perkins' 'Freedom Ride' in 1965".²⁰⁷ The Freedom Ride "had the effect of inspiring a young generation of Koori political activists in south-east Australia to stand up for their rights. Paul Coe and his sister Isobel had grown up on Erambie Mission in Cowra, Gary Williams and Gary Foley at Nambucca Heads, Billy and Lyn Craigie at Moree, Keith Smith at Nowra, Bob and Sol Bellea at Tweed Heads and Michael Anderson in Walgett. Lyall Munro had been inspired by the Freedom Ride when it passed through his home town, and he later said the experience enabled him to see 'the power of direct action that day in Moree'. All of these young people had then been part of the significant Aboriginal migration to the city that had occurred during the '60s."²⁰⁸

These young firebrands' first stop in Sydney was the Foundation for Aboriginal Affairs, an organisation with a social and cultural focus, which "grew out of" the Aboriginal Australian Fellowship.²⁰⁹ According to Chicka Dixon, the Foundation, as it was known, came into being in 1964 and "grew out of a discussion between myself, a fellow called Charles Perkins and Professor Bill Geddes of the Anthropology Department, Sydney University. We felt that black people in Sydney needed a centre

where they could get advice about jobs, meals, places where they could have social activities, legal advice if necessary ... Our general policy was to help Aborigines to help themselves ... We would hold a Saturday dance night and a Sunday night concert".²¹⁰ At the Foundation, the new activists mixed with the older generation of militant leaders, such as Chicka Dixon and Ken Brindle. They "came to sense themselves as the inheritors of a long tradition of political struggle as they met and conversed with aging legends of the indigenous struggle such as Bill Onus, Jack Patten, Bert Groves".²¹¹

Another influence, writes Foley, was "the sudden influx in the late '60s of [Afro-American] servicemen on R&R ... in Sydney ... These troops often gravitated toward the Sydney Black community in Redfern seeking solace from the prevalent white racism of Sydney. Consequently, the young indigenous activists became exposed to the latest developments in racial politics in America, and were provided by Black GIs with some of the latest in African-American political literature and music".²¹²

There were other influences too. "People like Paul Coe, Gary Williams and Gary Foley were starting to encounter new people and new ideas. Goodall describes these as 'diverse groupings of young people who sometimes called themselves 'New Left' ... only one bookshop in Sydney sold the type of material they were after ... the Third World Bookshop, run by Bob Gould, an anarchic Sydney left-wing identity. It was from Gould's bookshop that the Redfern activists began acquiring their reading matter, at first by the simple and expedient way of theft, and later when Gould agreed to provide the group with whatever books they wanted, gratis. The bulk of the relevant literature that Gould had related to the African-American political struggle, and so the Redfern activists began consuming the works of Malcolm X, Huey P. Newton, Bobby Seale, George Jackson, Eldridge Cleaver and Angela Davis".²¹³

Foley describes "three of the important defining moments in the emergence of Black Power as a seminal political force in indigenous politics in Australia" as "the 1970 establishment of the Redfern Aboriginal Legal Service; the 1971 Springbok rugby tour; and the Aboriginal Embassy in 1972".²¹⁴

The first political action of the Black Power leaders was to participate in the 1971 anti-apartheid demos against the touring South African rugby union team. Later that year, Indigenous activists in Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane and Adelaide organised "Black Moratorium" land rights and anti-racist demonstrations. "Koori activists' numbers were boosted by non-Koori supporters that included the Builders Labourers Federation, Waterside Workers Federation, Anti-Apartheid Movement ... and members of the Anti-Vietnam War Coalition".²¹⁵

"The convenors of AAM were Meredith Burgmann [who went on to become a NSW Labor upper house MP], Peter McGregor and Denis Freney [CPA members],

and all three had become friends of various members of the Redfern Black Power group. Burgmann was to later spend time at Wattie Creek with the Gurindjis at the behest of Frank Hardy, and Freney had already written many articles for ... *Tribune* about the situation in Redfern and indigenous issues in general. Furthermore, as Freney points out [in his autobiography], 'much of the planning for our activities took place at Meredith's house in Glebe ... Freney and other members of the CPA also had close connections with some of the Redfern activists through *Tribune* photographer Noel Hazard teaching Foley photographic processing and Builder's Labourers Federation (BLF) leaders Jack Munday, Bob Pringle and Joe Owens strong political support for the indigenous cause. Thus there were already strong links developing between the Redfern radicals and the Sydney Left'.²¹⁶ Noel Hazard (as was Peter McGregor until his death in 2007) is today an active member of the Socialist Alliance.

On January 25, 1972, Liberal PM Billy McMahon announced that his government would not grant land rights. In response, young Indigenous radicals from Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane planned, established and ran the most famous of all Aboriginal protests, the long-running Aboriginal Tent Embassy. Foley described the origins of the protest:

Indigenous leaders meeting in Sydney that night were outraged at what they regarded as stonewalling. By that time the core of the Redfern group comprised of Paul Coe and sister Isobel from Cowra, brilliant Qld writer and theorist John Newfong, Bob, Kaye and Sol Bellear, Tony Coorie from Lismore, Alana and Samantha Doolan from Townsville, Gary Williams and Gary Foley from Nambucca, Lyn Craigie and her brother Billy from Moree ... One of the group's mentors, Chicka Dixon, was keen on replicating the Native American's takeover of Alcatraz. He urged that they take over Pinchgut Island (Fort Denison) in Sydney harbour. "Not just take it over, defend it!", he said, because when the Indians had taken over Alcatraz they had placed their peoples plight into "the eyes of the world".

Ultimately however, a decision was made to confront the federal government on its own ground. So they dispatched four young men to Canberra. They were Billy Craigie, Tony Coorie, Michael Anderson, and Bertie Williams and were driven by ... Communist Party photographer, Noel Hazard. Their general instructions were to set up a protest and "hold the fort until a major demonstration could be organised", the idea being to at least be seen to be mounting an "immediate response" to McMahon. Upon arrival in Canberra early on the morning of 27th January 1972 the Koori men pitched a beach umbrella on the lawns outside Parliament House and proclaimed the site the office of the "Aboriginal Embassy".²¹⁷

Foley points out that "white support" for the Embassy came from those groups that

had backed the 1971 protests: “It should be remembered that the only person to go to gaol as a result of the July 1972 Embassy demonstrations was a white member of the Builders Labourers Union. The main reason that the Aboriginal Embassy demonstrators managed to survive that freezing Canberra winter of 1972 was because of the tremendous support that the Koori activists received from white supporters in that city, especially the Student Union of the ANU.” ■

Written Out of History

Boughton points out that despite there having been a “massive revision of the history of Indigenous peoples in Australia over recent decades, very little has been written which acknowledges the extent of the role the CPA played, especially prior to the emergence of this new liberal scholarship. The *Encyclopaedia of Aboriginal Australia*, a major reference work produced by the Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, has no entries under communist or Communist Party, nor does it mention the party in many of the entries where it might have, e.g. in the brief biographies of Indigenous people who were involved closely with, or actual members of, the CPA.”²¹⁸

While this may be due to an attempt by liberal academics to emphasise the independent political activity and leadership of Indigenous peoples themselves in the struggles that have produced the modern movement, he writes, “this too easily vacates the ground of reconciliation and black-white alliances to a de-historicised and sometimes over-compensating liberalism which under-rates the continuing importance of non-Indigenous working-class activism in achieving any lasting social change”.

There has also been a tendency for some of the “Black Power” generation of Indigenous rights campaigners to ignore, dismiss or understate the significance of the role of communists, and simply lump them together with other “white” liberals and do-gooders, even to label the CPA a “white” party. Yet this is an inaccurate portrait of the CPA. Over many years, some of Indigenous Australia’s best leaders cut their political teeth within, or in close collaboration, with the only party (until the late 1960s) that seriously and unfailingly fought for the rights of Indigenous people and against racism, raising virtually all the demands of the modern movement, often decades earlier. They and many other Indigenous activists gained their political and organising experience and confidence as activists within or working closely alongside the left-wing and militant trade unions, most of which were led or heavily influenced by members of the CPA, sometimes in alliance with ALP socialists.

As Joe McGinness pointed out in his autobiography: “No doubt it was my working

with organised labour, even more so in latter years, that caused me to be more aware [of racist oppression, exemplified in apartheid restrictions] ... it was my early experiences with the Waterside Workers Federation in the 1950s which helped me understand the system of organised labour ... I also became more aware and conscious of the deplorable working conditions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island workers.” McGinness joined the WWF in 1949 on Thursday Island before moving to Cairns in 1951, where he worked, apart from temporary stints in Sydney and Melbourne, until 1970. He later worked as a council worker until 1973, a liaison officer with the federal Aboriginal Affairs Department until 1975, and as a regional manager for Aboriginal Hostels Ltd. until he retired in 1980.²¹⁹

The names of unions such as the North Australian Workers Union, the Waterside Workers Federation, the Building Workers Industrial Union, the Builders Labourers Federation, the Miners Federation, Actors Equity and Australian Railways Union and many others appear over and over again in the history of Australia’s Indigenous people’s rights movement.

I have mentioned many Aboriginal militants, among them: Margaret Tucker, Lucy, Dick and Lindsay Eatock, Joe, Jack and Val McGinness, Dexter and Davis Daniels, Fred Waters, Faith Bandler, Chicka Dixon, Monty Moloney, Tom and Ray Peckham, Gladys O’Shane, Celia Smith, Harry Hall, and George and Mavis Rose. There were others we do not yet know about because their memories have not been recorded or have not surfaced. Memories like those of Louise West, who was secretary of the CPA’s Surry Hills branch in the ’40s, capture the enthusiasm of young Indigenous party members:

I joined the Communist Party in 1942. It was still illegal then, although this was a bit of a joke. No-one really took that seriously, least of all me, because I used to get around with a red handkerchief with a hammer and a sickle on it that my mother had embroidered ... I was really thrilled when I joined the party, I was thrilled with everything. I remember one of the first cadres’ lectures I attended was on chauvinism (they didn’t call it racism then). It explained how capitalism exploited people and used their colour and differences to divide people. All this was very interesting and understandable. So to me the party was the champion of all oppressed people ... [I was] studying Marxist theory like mad ... After I’d done some reading, I was sometimes tutor of a class. The party did a lot of encouraging of people at that stage and I went to a lot of classes ...²²⁰

West left the CPA in the late 1960s, but continued to be active in the Indigenous and women’s movements, working in her later years at Tranby Co-operative College for Aborigines and Women’s Liberation House.

The enormous support throughout the non-Indigenous community that this

movement now commands, evidenced in the quarter of a million people who marched across the Sydney Harbour Bridge in May 2000 on the anniversary of the 1967 referendum, grew from foundations constructed in earlier decades by the alliance of this country's Indigenous people and the working-class and socialist movements. History also shows that each significant gain won by the Indigenous people's rights movement has been achieved through this powerful combination. ■

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Despite there having been a massive revision of the history of Indigenous peoples in Australia over recent decades, very little has been written which acknowledges the extent of the role played by the left, communists and militant unionists. There has also been a tendency for some of the 'Black Power' generation of Indigenous rights campaigners to ignore, dismiss or understate the significance of the role of communists, and simply lump them together with other 'white' liberals and do-gooders, even to label the Communist Party a 'white' party.

Yet this is an inaccurate portrait of the CPA. Over many years, some of Indigenous Australia's best leaders cut their political teeth within, or in close collaboration with, the only party (until the late 1960s) that seriously and unfailingly fought for the rights of Indigenous people and against racism, raising virtually all the demands of the modern movement, often decades earlier.

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The enormous support throughout the non-Indigenous community that this movement now commands, evidenced in the quarter of a million people who marched across the Sydney Harbour Bridge in May 2000 on the anniversary of the 1967 referendum and the mass enthusiasm for PM Kevin Rudd's 2008 apology, grew from foundations constructed decades earlier by the alliance of this country's Indigenous people and the working-class and socialist movements. History shows that each significant gain won by the Indigenous people's rights movement has been achieved through this powerful 'black-red alliance'.

Resistance books