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EXPLOITATION OF BLACK WORKERS

The following article has been adapted from a paper given by Warwick Neilly, former organiser of the North Australian Workers' Union, in the Trade Unions and Co-operatives Course at the NSW Trade Union Training Centre.

The first major industry to start up in the Northern Territory was, of course, the beef industry. It was only in later years that the other major industry - mining - began to take its place.

The beef industry began in earnest a few years before the First World War and the key company was Vestey's, who became the major operators in the NT at a time when there was big competition in the world over beef markets. The British companies, of which Vestey's was one, were in competition with the American companies and they wanted big areas of land for producing beef. The NT was a natural for this and they moved in heavily with big properties and abattoirs.

At about the same time, the Federal government was taking an interest in the area and under a Labor government headed

by Prime Minister Fisher, they took full control and appointed an administrator in 1911. Labor's aim was to develop the land with many small landholders who would live in the NT, and a team of experts was sent to Darwin under the leadership of one, Dr. J.A. Gilruth.

In 1912 one of the first things they attempted was to develop the idea of a government-owned abattoir in Darwin. When this idea was floated, Vestey's retaliated, suggesting they build an abattoir to do the work and there would be no need to establish a government-owned outfit.

The following year, Labor was defeated and Vestey's private deal went ahead. Vestey's expansion in the slaughtering business was paralleled by their rapid land gains. Between 1914 and 1916, Vestey's obtained 36,000 square miles of land in the NT.

During these years the Northern Territory Workers' Union was formed and there began a history of struggle for at least one section of the workforce.

The founders of the NTWU included activists from the International Workingmen of the World, or "Wobblies", who did a lot of the early work. They were also active in southern parts of Australia and had as their main task the creation of what they called 'One Big Union'. The 'One Big Union' eventually became the Australian Workers' Union and, in many ways, the NTWU was similar to the AWU.

With the defeat of Labor in 1912 and no doubt under its own steam, the local administration in the NT became more and more conservative. They became more and more friendly to interests such as Vestey's and more oppressive to the general population, both black and white. Part of this oppression was to try to stop the development of union solidarity in the north.

There was a concentration of power in the hands of a few individuals. For example, one man, a Mr. Carey, was given the jobs of Director of Lands, and Agriculture, and Chief Protector of Aborigines. He was also, believe it or not, the Censor of all outgoing and incoming mail.

The two key jobs of Director of Lands and Chief Protector of Aborigines meant he was in a powerful position to do what he liked in the allocation of land and control of Aboriginal people

The development of Darwin as an administrative centre was built on these two key functions: control of Aboriginal people and land allocation to business interests.

This was the situation during the war years. But in 1917, Mr. Carey went right over the heads of the employers and started work with Vestey's. He no doubt left behind in the administration a group who would do his work.

During this time the hostility of workers was so great that it was reported by one of the leaders of the NTWU, Harold Nelson, that practically all wage earners had joined the union, in Darwin at least. Because of this, the union movement was able to infiltrate into areas previously kept closed by the employers and administrators.

The crunch came when Harold Nelson got hold of a letter written by Carey detailing a plan by Vestey's to take over a large pastoral holding which had a lease expiring in 1918. A figure of £20,000 (\$40,000) was mentioned as the price the Administrator wanted to carry out the operation. This was the work in which Carey was involved.

Of course the trade unions blew it wide open. Carey protested that his mail had been stolen, but Nelson replied that the union had had its mail stolen for several years by Carey. A meeting of union members called on all those involved in the Administration and Vestey's to resign and for the election of a new Administrator.

The next day a general strike was declared and a meeting held in the Administrator's residence. A rebellion had begun in Darwin over collusion between the Administrator and Vestey's.

The Administrator was still Dr. Gilruth who made his escape on the HMAS *Melbourne* which had been instructed to proceed to Darwin by Prime Minister Hughes. But while the *Melbourne* was there the crew mixed with locals in the pubs and became sympathetic to the cause. The captain ordered them back to the ship and the *Melbourne* left in a hurry. They left Carey and some others stranded. A few days later they were taken away by a Burns Philp steamer after threats of being thrown into the sea by the locals.

A subsequent Royal Commission forgave the local residents, saying they had been under extreme pressure at the time from the local administrators.

These were the beginnings of the labor movement in the Northern Territory, but the central issue to be looked at is the treatment of Aboriginal people in the industrial scene as they were, and still are, the bulk of the workforce in the cattle industry.

It is a fact of history that the initial militancy did not flow on to the organisation of Aboriginal people into unions.

Their conditions have always been bad and the reasons for this can be placed under three main headings:

* The desire of employers in the industry to make the greatest possible profit and expand

as much as possible, along with their racist attitudes;

- * Government or administrative efforts to directly assist the employers;
- * The inability of unions to work against this because of the racist attitudes of their members and officials. These prevailed in the community generally.

In 1970 I spent a couple of months with the Gurindji people at Wattie Creek. While there I talked with an Aborigine named Pincher Numiari who was one of the leaders of the Wave Hill station strike against Vestey's in 1966 - the longest strike in Australia's history which led to the land claim at Dagarugu, or Wattie Creek.

He told me he had been born at Wave Hill and that he had worked as a stock camp ringer. He said "I bin work for Vestey's all my life when I was young till I get married, in Wave Hill station. I bin start off in old station first. Old Wave Hill, not that place where they bin walk off I seen very bad, treat 'em like a dog when I was a kid."

Asked about things that had happened and things done by the station manager, he went on, "A lot of wrong. I saw them fellas walking here before, early days, all them old people here. They used to clean him road, no grader. This country, they used to cart him up bag of flour. Bag of corned meat. One box matches. No more, see. They bin walk on foot, don't matter how many miles on foot. All this country they bin clean him up, you know.

" Men, and women, all the children was there They bin all gone foot walk. Clean him out. Clean the stone, chuck the stone away. Next time they carry the rock on the neck and hand in chain Walk 'em foot walk, you know. Carry them brand on shoulder."

He said this had been done by the station manager. " If he can't do it, you s'posed to, sometime he take 'em over there. Shot him one bloke down over there.

"Bin going back to station in the night. To station in the night that Borwee, one boy. I was a kid then. They put the cattle in the



Aboriginal stockmen on strike at Wave Hill station.

cattle camp. Had a lunch. Then go out get his horse and go out and cut them bullock out, you know. An' then he pushed 'em fellas, all those boys: 'You mob go to cattle over there'. And they all bin go to cattle camp all them fellas, all them boys. Then, I don't know how many, might be two, might be three white bloke, one fella. They take him to river there and tie him around to chain and shot him there. And get fire and burn 'im up.

"Oh, yes. Bit of a cruel before, early day. Anything happen, they just took them over the creek there and shot them."

Conditions were "cruel" to use Pincher's words and they remain cruel even today, in varying degrees.

The colonisation of Australia meant that traditional Aboriginal society was shattered. Their economic activities and nomadic life were brought to an end as settlers claimed land for cultivation and sheep and cattle raising. In the sparsely settled northern and central region of Australia, once the resistance of Aboriginal people had been put down, their labor potential became great.

The lack of white workers and the fact that Aboriginal people could no longer work at their traditional economic activities meant that Aboriginal labor camps became essential parts of the cattle station economy. A number of people have pointed out that this relationship is no different from that in South Africa. In Australia, as with South Africa, this system of labor exploitation was without any real rewards for the workers.

Conditions on cattle stations have been described by many observers.

In 1946 Vestey's called in Professor Berndt of Sydney University to investigate conditions of employment at their Wave Hill Station. Vestey's were having trouble keeping labor and they wanted an expert opinion on how to stop this. Berndt's report became famous for what it exposed.

He found that a depressing situation existed with people housed in crudely built shacks of old bagging and iron. They were rarely waterproof and broke up in a strong wind.

He also found that simple things like a safe water supply were refused; that police were known as "neck chainers" and carried out physical violence against the Aboriginal

people. Young children were used under the theory of "catch them young and train them". Wage payments were often avoided and were not even paid under the Wards Employment Regulations. Medical attention was poor or non-existent. Food was bread, beef and tea three times a day. Prostitution was forced on the women to earn extra money and rape occurred under physical threat from white workers. Old age meant living on rations worse than others in the community.

Berndt said that to solve the problem of losing labor that living conditions should be improved and wages paid.

The company's reply to the money question was: "Money seems to be the root of all evil". They rejected his other suggestions. That was in 1946 - what about today?

A report on living conditions on cattle stations was commissioned by Gordon Bryant in 1973 when he was Minister for Aboriginal Affairs. This report, compared with Berndt's 1946 report, revealed that on two stations near Alice Springs, Utopia and Alcoota, conditions were the same.

1900 - 1946 - 1973 - no real change!

This summarises the approach of the vast majority of employers in the industry. They wanted to expand their land holdings quickly and maximise profit. They did this through defeating the Aboriginal people, exploiting their labor and providing no rewards. The exploitation of Aboriginal people is an indication of how the Australian economy worked in the past, and still works today.

The treatment described was paralleled by government activity through its various agencies - the police and welfare, in particular.

Welfare's role is more insidious and more difficult to understand than that of the police who were, in the past, seen as "neck chainers".

Under the heading of "protectionist policies", the various government agencies reinforced and gave legal status to exploitation.

In Queensland there is the infamous Aboriginal and Torres Straits Islanders Act, and in the Northern Territory we had the Wards Employment Ordinance.

Under the NT Ordinances, the weekly wage for Aboriginal male workers was set at 5 shillings (or 50 cents) a week in 1933. This was for work in agriculture, pastoral work, surface mining, transport, timber cutting and domestic work. By comparison the basic award rate for white male workers was £2.8.0 (or \$4.80) at the same time. The Ordinance also made some provisions for food, tobacco and clothing. What did this mean?

It meant that employers were able to pay nothing at all if they wanted to, or pay out 50 cents a week and everything would be legal. This was the function of government at that time: it gave the legal OK to employers' policies. Sub-standard wages and conditions of employment were legalised through the Ordinances and administered by the Welfare agencies.

The 50 cents did not change for 16 years! In 1949 it was increased to £1.00 (or \$2.00) a week for male Aboriginal workers, but only if they had three years' experience. Drivers were paid a little more but had a 7-day week, 16 hours a day job. Aboriginal women workers were paid 7/6 a week if the wife of a male employee, others were paid 10/-, or \$1 a week.

In 1957 the top rate was lifted to £2.8.3 (or \$4.83) with a 15/- clothing allowance.

Finally, in 1965 a decision was made to pay equal wages in the cattle industry in the NT but the new rates did not apply until 1968, only nine years ago. Even then the Conciliation and Arbitration Commission put the notorious "slow worker" clause into the award which allows employers to set lower rates if they wish.

The equal wage case in 1965 also saw women excluded from the operation of the award. This, despite the fact that they had been included in the old regulations. Women work as domestics - cleaning white workers' quarters, cooking for the boss' family, etc.

It means that Aboriginal women are still excluded (unless they are cooks in the general mess) from award coverage and there has been a lack of concern by the unions involved to correct the position. Currently, in the NT, this responsibility lies with the Federated Miscellaneous Workers' Union but, in the past, the approach has been that the work women do on the stations is not a part of the cattle industry. There are strong indications that this is not correct. The



Aboriginal "housing" at Vestey's "Chevron" at Mistake Creek.

(NT) Award. This had been done by Commissioner Portus in 1951 when the NAWU argued that they be included under the award. They were not necessarily arguing equal pay.

In 1965-66 the Arbitration Commission could not do this and had to grant the applicants equal wages. That they did not let it operate until 1968 is an example of the conservative influence of the Arbitration Commission on industrial life in Australia.

An example of the union's role in the past was that in 1923 the NTWU as it was then known, moved to prohibit Aborigines from the cattle industry. The Arbitration Commission did not allow this, realising that employers needed the labor. But let's not pat the Commission on the back - the decision was for the employers.

So, when we examine the wages struggle in the Northern Territory and consider the role of unions in relation to a key part of the workforce, the unions' effort has been minimal and, in fact, anti-Aboriginal. However, I want to make it clear that the future lies with the broad labor movement and efforts must be made to bring the problems of Aboriginal people in this society into the struggles of the labor movement.

The question of union membership here is crucial. It is no use having an award, for instance, if a union does not enforce its conditions. Unions have failed in this regard in the past.

A report on the situation in Wee Waa, NSW, for instance, by Norman Foster (Department of Labor and Immigration) in 1973, found that depressed wages existed due to the Australian Workers' Union (AWU) not enforcing the application of the award.

It was my observation in the NT that Aboriginal people have a high appreciation of the value of unions and are only too willing to join and get the real protection unions can offer.

There must be an ACTU-sponsored drive to clean up unorganised Aboriginal labor as a first step. Unfortunately, when we look at history again, there have been problems in even getting this type of activity off the ground.

In 1972-73 some officials of the Federated

Miscellaneous Workers' Union (FMWU) approached Gordon Bryant for assistance in organising Aboriginal workers in the Northern Territory. (The FMWU had recently absorbed the North Australian Workers' Union.)

Clyde Cameron intervened as Minister for Labor and Immigration and opposed Bryant doing anything practical.

The drive to unionise Aboriginal labor should occur in the context of a total social action program adopted by the labor movement to include health, welfare, land rights, housing, economic aid and education for Aboriginal people.

The Aboriginal question in trade union history is, in many ways, the guts of that history. A history must deal with people, and the people of Northern Australia were predominantly Aboriginal until the last 20-30 years. The key industry, the pastoral industry, of that period was built on their blood and sweat. Not many of us in other parts of Australia really understand this. But it is up to us to work to change that situation.

Union organisation in Northern Australia will become increasingly important to all Australian people. With the decline of Australian manufacturing industries, largely located in the southern States, and increased interest in mining in the north, the stakes for Australia's future are high.

Mining and similar industries are not labor intensive, but are highly profitable and this demands a new approach by unions.

With increasing unemployment created by business interests shifting their money into mining, perhaps we should begin to demand that some of the huge mining profits be spent in other areas of Australia to help provide jobs.

If union activity is left to traditional areas of wages and conditions on site for members working there, the rest of Australia will be ignored.

Unions must, of course, continue to struggle - and struggle hard - for the wages and working conditions of their members. But there are broader issues confronting Australia today and in the future. It is in the hands of the labor movement to do something about these issues.

Arbitration Commission has not had a case put to it on this question and it should be done without delay.

I remember having a discussion with a woman in Katherine before the season had fully started up last year. She was with her husband who told me that he was thinking of not going back to the station because he was not getting enough money that year, and for years before. His wife was even more bitter because the employer had offered her \$15.00 a week (an increase of \$5.00) to get them to go back and work - back to a 7-day week, dawn to dusk job.

The situation of women workers in the cattle industry is, therefore, even more depressed than that of male workers.

Before the equal wage case the Welfare Branch of the Department of the Northern Territory had the power to negotiate higher wages but never did so. On many occasions they did the reverse - lowered wages for workers whom the employers regarded as "handicapped".

From 1949 to 1957 there were numerous examples of this practice which proves without a doubt that the role of the Wards Employment Ordinance was tailored to suit the employers' sector of society in the NT.

Other provisions of these regulations were:

Section 32:

A fine of £100 or six months' jail if you went onto an Aboriginal living area without permission from Welfare or the station owner.

Section 46:

A penalty of £50 if someone encouraged a ward to leave his employment even if offered higher pay.

Sounds like the notorious Queensland Act?

The low wages on cattle stations had their parallel on mission stations and it was not until 1972 onwards with a federal Labor government that this was altered. But even today you can come across practices in this area which preserve sub-standard wages.

Some mission stations pay adults as juniors until they can prove their age to the paymaster. There were a couple of cases like this when I was in Darwin.

CONCLUSIONS

In summary, the government in the NT has, in the past, intervened to legalise sub-standard wages and living conditions. They have done this through various ordinances and the Welfare Branch of the Department of the Northern Territory.

Even though the ordinances laid down certain provisions for accommodation standards, there have been no prosecutions against employers in the history of their operation. This is an example of how the Welfare Branch worked - they turned a blind eye to reality. This is very effective because it means they create the laws and then police them in the interests of the employers. This is the second aspect of why conditions were, and still are, bad on cattle stations, at least.

What has been the response of unions to this situation? Their overall response has been poor! The situation is changing today but in the early days and up until recently trade unions and their officials have had similar views to those of the Australian people as a whole, including employers and government representatives.

Many would say the situation hasn't changed. I think some changes have been made, but there is a lot more work to do.

The Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders (FCAATSI) was formed in the early 'sixties, and also the ACTU began to pass resolutions at its Congresses deploring the Aboriginal employment situation. This led to the equal wages case in 1965.

But even with this case no real attempt was made by the union concerned, the North Australian Workers' Union, to join up Aboriginal workers. It did not call any Aboriginal witnesses from the industry in a case which rambled on for six months with the employers doing most of the talking.

Luckily, the political environment at least had slightly changed and the Conciliation and Arbitration Commission could not do as it did in 1951 and knock back the inclusion of Aboriginal workers into the Cattle Industry