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The Limits of Solidarity: The North Australian Workers Union as Advocate of Aboriginal Assimilation

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Chapter Six

The Limits of Solidarity: The
North Australian Workers’ Union
as Advocates of Assimilation

Julia Martínez

This chapter considers the role of the North Australian Workers’ Union (NAWU) in shaping Aboriginal assimilation policies in the Northern Territory during the 1920s and 1930s. Their contribution to the government’s policy directions was wide-ranging, covering diverse issues including the removal of children, calls for a non-discriminatory football code and a suggestion that so-called ‘half-castes’ be granted their own parliamentary representative. At each step, for better or worse, the NAWU was consistently in the frontline of the promotion of assimilation policy. Assimilation was important to the NAWU primarily as a means to achieve economic security. It was understood that Aboriginal workers would threaten white wages unless they could be included in the award wage system.

Assimilation for ‘half-castes’

The ideology of assimilation was present in Northern Territory government policy as early as 1918. Under the Aboriginals Ordinance of 1918, Aboriginal ‘half-castes’ were given an incentive to forgo all connections to Aboriginal family and culture in order to qualify for exemption from the control of the Ordinance. The Ordinance deprived Aboriginal people of choice and control in most aspects of their lives, including employment, housing and social activities. Male ‘half-castes’ over the age of eighteen were eligible for exemption, but could be deemed to be ‘Aboriginal’, and thus subject to the Ordinance, if they were married to an ‘aboriginal native’ or habitually associated with ‘aboriginal natives’. Female ‘half-castes’ remained subject to the Ordinance unless they were ‘legally married to a person who is
substantially of European origin or descent'. Up until 1936 there was no set procedure for applying for exemption. It was up to individuals to argue the case as the occasion arose. Section 59 stated that in the case of an offence against the Ordinance, it was presumed that a person was Aboriginal 'unless the contrary is shown to the satisfaction of the Magistrate of Justice'. This ad hoc process was considered sufficient at the time, as the government presumed that the majority of 'half-castes' would not meet the requirements and would continue to be classified as 'Aboriginal'.

Nevertheless, in raising the prospect of assimilation for 'half-castes', the 1918 Ordinance was at the forefront of assimilation policy. The influential Bleakley Report of 1928 was more limited in that it only advocated assimilation for so-called 'quadroons' and 'octoetoroons'. Bleakley sought to grant such people the chance to 'take their place in the white community' according to their portion of white blood, thus adhering to contemporary notions of racial hierarchy. On the subject of 'half-castes', Bleakley argued that Aboriginal people with '50 per cent or more aboriginal blood, no matter how carefully brought up and educated, will drift back to the aboriginal, where naturally he finds the atmosphere most congenial to him'.

The North Australian Workers' Union

Historically, the trade union movement in Australia had supported the 'White Australia' immigration policy in order to protect white employment from 'coloured' competition. The Australian Workers' Union (AWU), Australia's largest union, originally excluded 'colored aliens' from membership. Whether this restriction applied to Indigenous Australians, however, remained unclear. In any case, the NAWU was not affiliated with the AWU. The original Northern Territory branch of the AWU had been formed in 1914 by Harold Nelson and existed until 1921. Two rival unions were then formed, the North Australian Industrial Union and the Northern Territory Workers' Union, which amalgamated in 1927 to form the NAWU. From that time on, the NAWU operated as an independent union, affiliated to the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU). The NAWU membership rules excluded any person 'who is a Chinese, Japanese, Kanaka, or Afghan, or who belongs to any colored race'. However, this prohibition did not apply to 'Maoris, American Negroes or the issue of Mixed Parentage (European on one side) born in Australasia'. Thus the only Aboriginal workers entitled to join the NAWU were so-called 'half-castes'. The 'mixed parentage' clause also allowed entry to workers of Asian background, most notably those of Chinese-Australian descent.

Shortly after the formation of the NAWU there was an attempt to alter the membership rules, inspired by the new anti-racist push by the Communist Party of Australia. At the 1928 annual meeting, the motion was put that 'any coloured person born in Australia who has passed a 3rd class school examination standard be admitted to membership'. The motion was rejected with 51 in favour and 109 against. Although this proposal was aimed at Australian-born Chinese and was not intended to allow Aboriginal workers into the union, given that the vast majority of Aboriginal people at the time did not receive schooling, it was an indication that many NAWU members preferred cultural to biological or racial criteria.

Robert Toupein, previously mayor of Darwin, held the position of secretary of the NAWU until 1935. Toupein's attitude toward Aboriginal labour combined a concern for Aboriginal exploitation with an overriding mission to improve 'white' working conditions. In 1929, he wrote an article entitled, 'Exploitation of Aboriginals in Northern Australia' for the Pan-Pacific Worker, which was produced by the ACTU in association with the left-wing Pan-Pacific Trade Union secretariat. This body was concerned that Australian trade unions were steeped in 'white chauvinism' and 'a very dangerous racial prejudice'. Toupein wrote:

The Commonwealth Government should bestir itself to a proper sense of its obligations to these unfortunate people disinherited of their natural hunting domains, thereby becoming helpless subjects of exploitation by squatters, a degenerate fast-dying race and a competitive menace to the white workers.

Toupein could expect a sympathetic hearing for these views from the Scullin Labor government elected in October 1929. Arthur Blakeley, president of the AWU from 1919 to 1923, was appointed minister for home affairs in charge of the Northern Territory. In 1930 Blakeley wrote:

When I assumed office I was not satisfied that the aboriginals and half-castes were receiving proper and adequate treatment in regard to wages and conditions. It would appear that there was a form of slavery in operation and that aboriginals were being worked without any remuneration whatever.
The notion that Aboriginal workers were entitled to wages, let alone award wages, was radical in 1930; it was an important step in developing the assimilationist platform of the labour movement.

The 1930 Darwin conference

To examine these issues, Minister Blakeley organised a conference to be held in Darwin in 1930, inviting representatives of the pastoralists, missionaries and the NAWU. The union representatives were NAWU secretary Robert Toupein and organiser Owen Rowe.

At the conference the NAWU argued that there were two options on the employment of so-called ‘full-blood’ Aboriginal workers: assimilation or segregation. Either Aboriginal workers should receive the minimum award wage, thus protecting white labour from cheap competition, or the Aboriginal population should be segregated so as to remove them entirely from the labour market. Toupein proposed that Aboriginal people, by which he meant ‘full-blood’ Aboriginals, be removed from pastoral stations, stating:

If their position is so hopeless that we cannot lift them then the only thing to do is to segregate them ... If they are left to drift and try to eke out an existence among the whites the same fate will rapidly overcome them in the Northern Territory as in the other States and it will not be long before they are entirely extinguished as a people ... I think that we are bound for the protection of the white and for the blacks themselves, to submit a motion that the blacks would be segregated entirely in Reserves and Government Institutions and Missions ... 16

Toupein’s suggestion did not represent the view of all NAWU members. The 1930 NAWU annual meeting was divided in its views when communists Mahoney and Waldie put forward the motion ‘That all bona-fide workers, irrespective of color, shall be admitted to full membership in the NAWU’. President Bob Murray indicated his rejection by ruling the notice of motion out of order on a technicality. Toupein was similarly opposed to the proposal. In his secretary’s report, he spoke out against the ‘sensation-seeking few among us’ who ‘adopt the role of critic’.17

While advocating the segregation of so-called ‘full-blood’ Aboriginals, the NAWU favoured the assimilation of ‘half-castes’. The 1930 conference was opened by Dr Cecil Cook, chief protector of Aborigines, with the motion ‘That this meeting approves of the principle of uplifting the half-caste embodied in the Half-caste Regulations’.18 Cook had been appointed in 1927, having trained in tropical medicine in London and in anthropology at the University of Sydney under Professor Radcliffe-Brown.19 Cook’s long-term plan was the absorption of ‘half-castes’ into the ‘white’ population. The primary means of such absorption was to be controlled breeding. Whereas the controversial science of eugenics in this period argued for purity of ‘blood’ in order to ensure the perfection of the ‘race’, Cook’s plan was to encourage the ‘mating of white male and half-caste female, thereby gradually eliminating colour’.20 His ideas were a radical break with segregationist theories, such as those of Baldwin Spencer, who observed in 1912: ‘One thing is certain and that is that the white population as a whole will never mix with half-castes’. Spencer advocated that ‘half-castes’ be encouraged to mix and marry with ‘full-bloods’ and so limit the ‘contamination’ of the European race.21

Speaking at the 1930 conference, the NAWU executive supported Cook’s motion of ‘uplift’ because they hoped that this would help to enforce award wages for ‘half-castes’. Adult male ‘half-castes’ were able to join the union and were thus already entitled to award wages, but this was difficult to enforce in remote areas. Toupein spoke on assimilation for ‘half-castes’, arguing that ‘half-castes’ had ability and should be paid award wages, but stressed that this was to prevent them becoming ‘a serious menace to the white workers’.22 He supported the policy of education for ‘half-castes’, based on their ‘white blood’.23 He argued that they were ‘the white man’s offspring and should not be forced into aboriginal status’.24 Toupein employed both racial and cultural criteria for assimilation in this instance, but despite the rhetoric it is not clear that ‘whiteness’ figured prominently in NAWU practice.

The NAWU was particularly concerned about the working conditions of male ‘half-castes’ under the age of eighteen and female ‘half-castes’ because while they remained under the control of the Aboriginals Ordinance they were employed under the same exploitative conditions as ‘full-blood’ Aboriginal workers. At the request of the NAWU, one aspect of the employment of young male workers had already been addressed in the Half-Caste Regulations, gazetted on 8 February 1930, which called for ‘half-caste’ youths in apprentice positions to be paid at the same rate as white youths. According to the 1926 ‘Return of Halfcastes and Quadroons in the Northern Territory’ there were thirty-two males under the age of eighteen working on pastoral stations. The youngest, aged ten, was listed as ‘Stockman'.

The Limits of Solidarity
Minister Blakeley was forced to suspend these new regulations following strenuous objections from the pastoral lobby, but he reinstated them in November 1930.25

The working conditions of 'half-caste' women

Also speaking at the 1930 conference was Owen Rowe, NAWU organiser from 1920 to 1934.26 Rowe was particularly concerned that 'half-caste' women be included in any new regulations on the same terms of 'half-caste' men. According to the 1926 'Return of Halfcastes and Quadroons', there were fifteen women employed as domestics in Darwin, aged between thirteen and forty-three and predominantly of Filipino or Malay descent.27 In the Northern Territory overall, there were approximately 129 females listed as domestics. Rowe suggested that female 'half-castes' should be paid at rates of 17/6 for girls aged between sixteen and eighteen years, on the understanding that they would clothe themselves, and 25/- for those aged up to twenty-one.28 The 1928 Bleakley schedule had proposed far lower wages of 3/6 with clothes and 7/6 without. Both the unionists and Cook agreed that this was too low. During the debate it was revealed that Cook's own typist, who was deemed to be 'half-caste', was on a wage of £2/8/9 per week.29 It was difficult for Cook to claim that regulations were in the best interest of the 'half-caste' women when those who were working outside the regulations were able to command wages that were the equivalent of white wages.

Rowe argued that 'half-caste' women were 'quite as efficient as the white girls' and deserved higher wages than they were receiving. He accused Bleakley of believing 'that the half-caste should be thrown back into the aboriginal camp'.30 Instead, Rowe suggested providing them with a 'white scale of living' and allowing them to buy their own clothes, giving them the 'right to choose for themselves and exercise their own tastes the same as the white girl would have'. He stated: 'It is not right that because the girl happens to have a bit of colored blood in her she should not be paid for her labour'.31

When the new wage structure for 'half-castes' was put to the vote, the union representatives were out-voted by the pastoralists and the missionaries. As a result, 'half-caste' domestic wages were set at six shillings per week, and this remained in force until 1938. Of those six shillings, three shillings were paid into the Aboriginal Department's trust fund, and it was up to the chief protector to determine whether that money should be paid out to the women. Rowe's policy suggestions for 'half-caste' women were assimilationist in character and suggest that the NAWU was more 'forward-thinking' than other lobby groups or government officials. Assimilation was viewed by Rowe as an unproblematic shift toward egalitarianism, but despite this he did not advocate equality for so-called 'full-blood' women.

The removal of children

From 1912 to 1923 the majority of 'half-castes' in Darwin lived alongside the 'full-blood' population in the Kahlin Compound. This institution was originally established to keep the Aboriginal population in Darwin away from the supposedly debasing influence of Chinatown. In 1923, however, a local committee of inquiry concluded that 'half-castes' should be separated from their Aboriginal parents at an early age to be 'reared in a more healthy and elevating environment'.32 The Half-Caste Home was established as a separate institution in the residential suburb of Myilly Point. Russell McGregor notes that less than two years after opening there were complaints that the house was overcrowded.33 The 1926 'Return of Halfcastes and Quadroons' listed twenty-five inhabitants of the Darwin Half-Caste Home. Of these, fifteen were under the age of ten, and five of those were under the age of three.34 The majority of residents were girls. The number of inmates rose to 105 by 1931.35

According to Tony Austin, conditions in the Half-Caste Home were far from congenial. Daisy Ruddick, who lived in this house, said that she and other residents were always hungry and had to steal food. She also recalled being beaten.36 When the conditions of the Half-Caste Home were queried at the 1930 conference, Cook defended himself, arguing that when 'one of them is removed to go to service there are always weeks of heart-burning and home-sickness and that speaks a lot for the home'.37

Despite the questionable reputation of the Half-Caste Home, the NAWU supported the program of separating 'half-castes' from the rest of the Aboriginal population. At the 1930 conference, Rowe considered this separation to be essential if 'half-caste' women were to be trained to a level where they would warrant award wages. Rowe argued that domestic servants should not be hired out under the age of sixteen, as the younger girls were 'most difficult to control'. In this proposal, he mentions the 'Compound' but is in fact referring to the Half-Caste Home. He stated:

It would be a good idea to keep them in the Compound and turn them out as efficient workers. Unless this is done one cannot demand a
decent wage for them because from 12 to 15 the half-caste girl is more inclined to associate with the gins and blacks than she would after isolation in the Compound.38

Rowe moved a motion, which was subsequently passed, stating: 'That to give effect to the recommendations of this conference, it is necessary that the half-caste be segregated from the black from the age of 3 to 16 years'. The NAWU advocated the institutionalisation of young 'half-castes' on the basis that assimilated women would be more likely to attract higher wages, and thus be less of a threat to unionism. They assumed that higher wages would only be warranted in cases where 'half-caste' women both assimilated into 'white' society and were segregated from their Aboriginal families.39

Rowe was supported in his stance by Cook, who oversaw the 'segregation' of 'half-castes', but there was some popular protest over the policy. A Martin, the manager of the pastoral station Victoria River Downs, protested at the conference against the removal of young children, arguing: 'It doesn't seem right that we should be able to take the child from its mother because they think as much of their children as we do of ours'.40 In 1932 an article in the Northern Standard, titled 'Blackbirding', spoke of the 'callously brutal treatment' of six children who had arrived in Darwin on a truck, one only fifteen months old, leaving behind a 'frantic mother'. The article read:

The general public are unable to understand the reason for practically kidnapping these children ... The Darwin half-castes home is already crowded and cramped. The half-castes evidently suffer from too much Government protection and too little human sympathy and kindly treatment. A good number of local officials severely condemn the policy of tearing these children away from their parents and home life on stations, a practice prevalent for years past.41

In a 1932 report entitled 'Half-caste problem' Cook noted that although the 'white' population of the Northern Territory was 2,950 and the 'half-caste' population was 852, those proportions would not long remain. In twenty years the 'half-caste' population would 'have reproduced sufficiently to become a predominant part of the local population', he warned. His recommendation was:

To treat the Half-Caste as a white, educating him to compete on equal terms with the white citizen. In this way there will be little opportunity of the Half-Caste controlling the labour market except on the ground of merit. This procedure moreover opens another field in the solution of the urgent problem. By elevating the girls to white standard it will be possible to marry an increasing number to white settlers, whilst the boys could be safely removed to centres of denser white population where they would be competent to take work on the same basis as white men, thereby reducing the coloured population of the Territory and very appreciably diminishing the coloured birth-rate.42

This, he argued, would be a 'method by which the future of this country can be safeguarded in the absence of such radical methods as sterilization of the unfit and legalized abortion'.43

In 1931, there were twenty-seven males and fifty females living in the Half-Caste Home.44 The following year the administration announced that the girls were to remain in Kahlin Compound, where they could be 'trained' as domestic servants, and the boys were to be moved inland to Pine Creek.45 Continuing his commentary on government procedures, Rowe complained in 1932 that 'half-castes' were receiving a 'very rudimentary schooling' and were 'not taught any of the trades, nor yet are the females given any education in the domestic callings'.46 He wrote: 'The young female is in practically the same industrial position as in years gone by, except, perhaps, that a little more care is taken of her morals'.47 In that same year Toupein wrote to Harold Nelson, parliamentary member for the Northern Territory, stating that he agreed with Cook that 'half-castes' should be trained in the use of money, in keeping with the new policy of education and assimilation.48 Again, the emphasis was on what might be termed the 'vocational' assimilation of the 'half-caste'. NAWU officials demonstrated their sincerity about including 'half-caste' workers within the union in July 1932 by appointing 'half-caste' worker Johnny Ah Mat as union delegate for the Sorting Shed Section.49

The communist view

The communist members of the NAWU, led by Mahoney, who was leader of the Darwin Unemployed Workers' Movement (UWM), continued to lobby for Aboriginal rights independently of the NAWU. In 1931 the UWM announced:

That 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 ... we demand that they be granted full rights to enter any Trade Union ... We furthermore condemn the churches and missions and Trade
Unions for not taking up the struggle on behalf of the aboriginal and half-caste race to bring about their complete emancipation from the present system. 50

This followed the announcement in September 1931 of the CPA fourteen-point program demanding equal rights for all Aborigines, full wages, the abolition of the Protection Boards and the creation of independent Aboriginal republics in central, northern and northwestern Australia. 51 These proposals went far beyond the government's assimilation programs in several respects. By calling for equality for all Aboriginal Australians, the CPA rejected the racial discrimination inherent in the 'half-caste' regulations. By proposing to grant northern Aboriginal peoples self-determination, the CPA called into question the very basis of Commonwealth government authority. Nevertheless, even the communists portrayed the Aborigines as 'backward'. A Workers' Weekly article stated that it was 'the duty of all organisations of the exploited white population to raise their voices in opposition to this vile treatment of a backward people'. 52

Conservative criticism

The radical nature of NAWU policy is made clear if we consider the criticism from conservatives. The Lyons government came to power in January 1932, and the following year Colonel Robert Weddell, administrator of the Northern Territory, complained to Minister for the Interior John Arthur Perkins about the direction of Aboriginal policy. Weddell rejected that part of the Aboriginals Ordinance of 1918 that exempted 'half-caste' men. He wrote:

the chief bar to the employment ... of half-castes is the fact that they are given full citizen rights and permitted and enticed to become members of an Industrial Union. Our half-castes are mostly of the white-black cross, which produces a peculiar type not noted for its high mentality, and in my opinion I consider it would be beneficial to the Territory not to extend to them the privilege of being enrolled as electors ... further as time goes on the Half-Castes will 'swamp' and dominate the North Australian Workers' Union. 53

Minister Perkins asked the bishop of Carpentaria to comment. The bishop, though somewhat disapproving, supported the 'privileges' allowed to 'half-castes'. He explained:

The Darwin half-castes ... are admitted to and enjoy the privileges of the various sections of the North Australian Workers' Union. They are also admitted to sporting circles and there are pronounced instances where even certain Administrative officials have accepted offices in football clubs, the membership of which is composed mostly of half-castes; in fact some of these individuals appear to suffer from an acute anti-white complex. 54

Ultimately, Colonel Weddell's suggestions were ignored because it was made clear to the government that there was popular support for the inclusion of 'half-castes' within both the union and the wider community.

The NAWU came under criticism again in 1937, this time because of their disregard for the proper racial hierarchy. C.L.A Abbott, former minister for home affairs (1928-29), became administrator for the Territory in 1937. Devoutly anti-labour, Abbott sought to undermine the NAWU. 55 During the hearing into the Waterside Workers' Award, Abbott criticised the arbitration court for awarding Darwin waterside workers such high rates of pay. He questioned the worth of their labour and suggested that the workers were 'racially' inferior. As evidence, he presented a list of the names of eighty-one waterside workers and commented that the 'types and origins' of the workers were 'very mixed indeed'. Abbott explained that 'Half-Castes constitute a very large proportion of the English names appearing on this list'. 56

Failing to appreciate the equal status of 'half-caste' workers, Abbott attempted to persuade the federal arbitration court to lower the wages of waterside workers on the basis of their 'race', thus forcing the NAWU unionists to defend their workers. Like Colonel Weddell before him, Abbott had a limited understanding of the assimilation program for 'half-castes'.

Social integration for 'half-caste' men

Most members of the administrative elite were opposed to mixing with 'half-castes'. They understood assimilation to be a policy for the education of 'half-castes' that aimed to segregate them from the rest of the Aboriginal population. Only Cook advocated their integration into white society. In contrast, the NAWU saw assimilation as including social integration. An example of this was the NAWU lobby on behalf of 'half-caste' football players.

The introduction of Australian Rules football in Darwin in the 1910s is credited to Reuben Cooper, a well-known and respected 'half-caste' who learned football at Prince Alfred College in Adelaide. Cooper was Captain of the Vestey's team until 1920. 57 In 1926, a
segregationist lobby group within the local council forced the introduction of a white-only football league and banned all ‘coloured’ players from the field. Writing in the *Northern Standard*, one commentator, ‘Fairplay’, stated that the
colour line of prejudice and sectarianism still lives and promises to rise from its ashes in as virulent form as in the past. That the coloured boys in their native land should be debarred by the imported article from playing football ... I quite agree there should be vote taken of Darwin residents interested in fair play, as football will certainly become mediocre without them ... There should be no colour line bringing back the dead past to Darwin ...59

Protesters boycotted the white-only games, and attendance fell from several hundred to a mere handful.60 In a letter to the editor, entitled ‘The color line’, H Edwards, delegate of the Vestyes team, complained:

> it is difficult to understand what objections anyone can have to playing with the coloured lads, except, perhaps their superiority of play ... This movement to disenfranchise the locals from participation in football comes mainly from birds of passage who are here to-day and gone to-morrow ... 61

In 1928 a public meeting was called to discuss the re-admittance of ‘half-caste’ players. The meeting was opened by Mahoney, communist member of the NAWU, who stated that ‘debarring of the coloured boys in the local football arena was a violation of the fundamental principles of sport’. Mahoney was joined by Nelson, the founding member of the Darwin AWU and Northern Territory member of parliament. Nelson spoke against the ‘colour line’ and argued that they did not want to base their society on ‘colour and caste’, as was done in Singapore. He explicitly rejected this British colonial model of a divided multi-racial society. NAWU official Murray echoed this rejection of segregation, suggesting that rather than simply forming one team of ‘coloured’ players, they divide the ‘coloured’ players evenly among three mixed teams.62 The creation of mixed teams was a clear indication that Murray favoured social inclusion. In this sense, inclusion might be regarded as the benign face of assimilation. In the following year Murray was elected president of the NAWU.63

**Drinking mates**
The NAWU also campaigned for the right of ‘half-castes’ to drink alcohol. There were disputes over the serving of alcohol to ‘half-castes’ in 1920. After a court conviction of a white man for supplying alcohol to a ‘half-caste’ was queried, the *Northern Territory Times* reported that there were ‘half-castes who belong to the AWU and who are openly served with liquor at the State hotels’.64 The NAWU consistently argued that ‘half-castes’ should be entitled to drink in hotels. In 1931, after the communist members of the union took up the cause, Rowe wrote:

> The Communists have taken up the case of beer for the halfcastes. Strange how the brilliant leaders of the local commune seize on the least essential points of a case and flog it to death! This bagman is in favour of the halfcaste having the right to go and have a booze the same as any other ‘Gullud gentleman’, or white, in the Territory ... The halfcaste attains citizenship at 21 and though bagmen are as a rule not lawyers, this bagman thinks that a prosecution of any halfcaste for drinking in a hotel ... is illegal.65

Rowe was mistaken in his reading of the law. ‘Half-caste’ male adults were entitled to citizenship, providing they did not associate with ‘full-blood’ Aboriginals, but this was not an automatic process. It was up to ‘half-castes’ to prove to the court that they were eligible for exemption in order to avoid prosecution under the *Aboriginal Ordinance* of 1918. Nevertheless, the NAWU interpretation of the Ordinance meant that Darwin ‘half-castes’ who were members of the NAWU believed themselves to be automatically exempt from the Ordinance.

This confusion was not resolved until 1936, when the Darwin Half-Caste Association was formed to combat this and other restrictions. The problem was that there was no formal process by which individual ‘half-castes’ were exempt from the provisions of the Ordinance. In order to remedy this, in May 1936 the Ordinance was amended to allow eligible ‘half-castes’ to apply for official exemption papers.66 This only served to emphasise the distinction between white and ‘half-caste’, as Cook stipulated that they were granted only on condition of good behaviour. According to Joe McGinness, the certificates, which were given the nickname of ‘dog’s licences’, could be demanded by the police as proof of exemption at any time.67 Those ‘half-castes’ who were active members of the NAWU and who had always assumed themselves to be exempt from the Ordinance were offended by the sudden need to prove themselves to be worthy of citizenship rights.

The issue of exemptions demonstrated the continuing administrative paternalism and the limits of assimilation policy. Cook,
The formation of the Darwin Half-Caste Association in 1936 has assimilation ideology, asking for 'the same political rights and social

Citizenship rights were not inalienable but a privilege requiring obedience to the rules laid down by the chief protector.

While the issue of drinking was relatively minor, it did lead Murray, as president of the NAWU, to more radical demands. In 1937 he wrote:

Would the atrocities that go on to-day among the half-caste population continue if they had some direct representation where they could be heard and tell the Minister how they are being robbed and exploited by those who are supposed to be their protectors. Matters have been put to me of late and it is hard to believe such conditions existed. The question has been raised several times in the Federal Parliament if it were possible to find anybody to represent these people ... I say, Mr Editor, yes. I know many whom I can recommend. There are Jim and Harry Scott. Reuben Cooper with a college education is also quite competent. There is the McGuinness [sic] family with public school educations. There is the Ah Mat family. The Huddleston boys on the Western Australian side are also educated enough to take up the fight for the rights of these people and possibly many more that I do not call to mind at the moment.

This call for parliamentary representation indicated the difference between the NAWU and the government views on assimilation. It is not surprising that it was Murray who put forward this suggestion, as he had the longest record of fighting for the inclusion of 'half-castes' in the union, going back to the early 1920s when he was a member of the NTWU.

Distinctions of colour and caste

The formation of the Darwin Half-Caste Association in 1936 has parallels with the 1937 formation of the Aborigines Progressive Association in Sydney, and the Victoria-based Australian Aborigines' League (AAL). According to McGregor, both associations accepted assimilation ideology, asking for 'the same political rights and social services as our white fellow Australians'. William Cooper, secretary of the AAL, asked for legislation 'granting full rights to aborigines', but only to those 'who have attained civilised status'. Unlike the Darwin Association, Cooper rejected distinctions that separated 'half-caste' from 'full-blood'. Cooper wrote: 'Let the determination be, not color, but capacity.'

The question of colour was raised by the secretary of the NAWU, Jack McDonald. He wrote to Minister Paterson in 1936 on behalf of Donald Bonson, stating:

He has the colour and characteristics of a white man, yet as the law stands, he is classed as a half-caste. He is a printer in the office of the 'Northern Standard', a prominent footballer, and a good citizen. He feels his position very keenly, and I think he impressed you favourably during the interview. I feel, Sir, that it would be a graceful act on your part, to so amend the regulations, that he would not be driven to associate with the men who are herded together in the Compound.

McDonald listed some characteristics of what he saw as successful cultural assimilation, namely having a good job, being a good footballer, and being a good citizen. McDonald implies, however, that the primary prerequisite for assimilation is having the 'colour and characteristics of a white man'. The fact that Donald Bonson had unusually fair colouring appears to have prompted this special plea. McDonald's emphasis on physical 'whiteness' in this instance was quite distinct from the usual NAWU work-related discourse in which 'whiteness' could become a quality attributed to all staunch union members. It is possible, however, that McDonald wrote with Minister Paterson in mind, in the belief that this letter reflected Paterson's own understanding of assimilation.

Despite his support for 'half-caste' inclusion, McDonald was in favour of social segregation for so-called 'full-blood' Aboriginals. His son, Patrick, recalled in an interview that:

Dad wouldn't allow it, being union secretary, he wouldn't employ, you know, cheap labour. Oh, wouldn't even let them in the house. We did have one black boy who used to come, and he'd chop the wood, and he'd hang the washing out for Mum and bring it back. But never allowed in the house, anything like that.

The NAWU remained silent on the issue of inclusion of so-called 'full-blood' Aboriginal workers into the union. The workers themselves were forced to organise their own lobby. Representatives of the Larrakeyah Aboriginal community sent a deputation to Administrator
Weedell in 1936, which was reported in the Northern Standard. They asked: 'How can we buy clothes for ourselves and keep our families on 3/-?' In a period when the concept of the male as 'breadwinner' was the norm, there was no concept of the male Aboriginal worker as breadwinner. Unlike 'half-caste' men, who were generally encouraged by the NAWU to take on the roles of 'responsible' adult men, so-called 'full-blood' Aboriginal workers and their families were more likely to be thought of as the responsibility of the State.

While largely ignoring the plight of 'full-blood' Aboriginal workers, the NAWU was more sympathetic to 'half-caste' women. In 1938 the NAWU proposed that all 'half-caste' women who joined the union should be exempt from the provisions of the Aboriginal Ordinance like their male counterparts. In this case, Cook was not prepared to relinquish control of the women but proposed that in special circumstances higher wages might be asked for, not exceeding £1 per week. Somewhat uncharacteristically, Administrator Abbott supported the project. Speaking on 'efficiency in female half castes' Abbott argued:

there are certainly some who are most efficient as cooks or housemaids and whose conduct is quite good. In my own establishment recently, a half caste female employee cooked an Official Dinner for 28 people and it is obvious that this employee deserves remuneration at a higher rate than that which is laid down in the Ordinance.77

Again, this case demonstrates that the NAWU was leading the way in terms of policy changes.

The 'new deal'

In 1937 Jack McEwen was appointed minister for the interior. McEwen drafted a new Aboriginal policy with the help of A P Elkin, professor of anthropology at the University of Sydney. The 'new deal for Aborigines' was issued in February 1939. Despite having officially disregarded Cook's proposals for change, the new deal was fundamentally in keeping with Cook's ideas on assimilation.78 It aimed:

- to raise the status of the aboriginal ... to such a degree as would justify the conferring of full citizenship rights upon these people by an appropriate authority, each person being considered as an individual. Such person would, of course, be entitled to all the privileges of white workers.79

This new Aboriginal policy should have signalled a time for change in Aboriginal employment conditions, because it made provision for all Aboriginal workers to achieve award wages rather than just 'half-caste' workers. But McEwen still envisaged an hierarchical wage structure, stating that those who were unable to reach white standards would be placed in employment:

- for which payment would be made in accordance with their capacity to give service, but not under conditions which would permit the use of coloured workers to break down the established conditions of labour in Australia.80

In matters of industrial relations, the new deal reiterated policies that had been in place since the 1930 conference.

The introduction of the new deal came at a time when the NAWU was in turmoil. By early 1940, the old executive had been ousted by newly arrived communist unionists. It was not until 1948 that the NAWU membership rules were altered to remove the racially based membership clause to allow entry to all Aboriginal workers.81 The change was opposed by Minister of the Interior Herbert Johnson. A departmental memorandum noted that the director of native affairs in Darwin was 'alarmed' at the possible results, because this 'could have the effect of removing full-blood aboriginals from any real control by the Native Affairs Branch'. He also argued that the 'bulk of working natives' would be thrown out of employment, as the employers would not be prepared to 'engage natives on the same terms as white men'.82 The government response to the NAWU suggests that the government still viewed assimilation as requiring control; the government stopped short of accepting the NAWU push for equality.

Conclusion

During the period from the 1920s to the 1930s, official Northern Territory policy maintained a limited notion of assimilation that applied only to 'half-caste' Aboriginals. The so-called 'uplift' of 'half-castes' was regarded as something of an experiment. The executive members of the NAWU were fully supportive of this 'uplift' and in many instances they were in the frontline, demanding extensions to existing assimilation policies. Their primary concern was to achieve award wages for all 'half-castes', thereby protecting white workers from cheap labour.

But the NAWU also took a stance on issues of cultural assimilation. Rowe publicly supported removing children from their families. He
believed that their segregation was necessary to achieve assimilation. His policy also targeted 'half-caste' women, aiming to bring them into the 'white' award wage system. While the government endorsed the NAWU stance on segregation, the proposal to increase wages was rejected. The women were to be denied Aboriginality and at the same time denied 'white' status. McDonald, as secretary of the NAWU, saw the separation of 'half-caste' and 'full-blood' as an end in itself. In contrast, Murray, as NAWU president in the late 1930s, was the champion of a version of assimilation that was concerned with social inclusion and equal rights, including parliamentary representation. While government agencies viewed cultural assimilation as being restricted to basic education and vocational training, for the NAWU cultural assimilation was concerned with the participation of 'half-caste' workers in what were regarded as typically 'Australian' activities, such as Australian Rules football and drinking in the pub. The NAWU came to be regarded as the strongest allies for 'half-castes' struggling to obtain basic personal freedoms in an era when assimilation was the only means to achieve basic human rights.