

'Stolen Wages, Stolen Lives'

Australia Asia Worker Links Public Meeting
Victoria Trades Hall
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Speech by Alfred Lacey, Deputy Chair Palm Island Council and Deputy Chair Aboriginal Coordinating Council and ATSIC Regional Councillor.

Thank you, it's been a wonderful thing to be here and speaking at MartinKingham's rally this morning will probably stay in my memory for quite some time.

Firstly I'd like to acknowledge the Wurundjeri People for allowing me to speak on their country.

I'd also like to thank the Australia Asia Worker Links for inviting us here in solidarity to talk up the issue and tell the story our way, as well as ANTaR Victoria and the many other people who have made us feel welcome here.

I'd also like to acknowledge the work of historian Dr Rosalind Kidd and others in Queensland who have supported us, and the contribution and the struggles of our own people to have this issue heard.

The stolen wages is an issue which sometimes gets put into a bracket of being 'a black issue' and goes from there into a 'too hard basket' rather than being seen as a working issue about what most Australians have always enjoyed.

And that's the basic right to put in a good days work, earn a good dollar to put the bread and butter on the table at home and get your children off to school.

Some of the people I'll be talking about here you'll never know but I want to acknowledge their struggle and their contribution to our struggle here today by paying our respects to them.

To do that I'd like us to stand and pause here for a minute's silence.

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If you read or hear about Australian history, it's easy to think this country was built by a lot of 'famous' people - Prime Ministers, statesmen, economists, and even singers or poets.

But it wasn't the politicians or governments, or many of the people who have claimed the spotlight of history in the past 200 years who built this country, it was workers.

And it's workers who keep this country going today - our nurses, teachers, labourers - people who are out there every single day getting on with their jobs whether they like them or not.

People who ask to be recognised and respected for their work and acknowledged for their diligence and contribution by being properly paid and properly cared for by their employers.

People who at the end of the day see their hard work as a meaningful contribution to the health, wealth and well-being of a country we should all be proud of.

The Aboriginal people who contributed to building this country are asking for nothing more than that.

Images of Australian identity in recent history have nearly always been wrapped up in the generic outback stockman - that hard working, good humoured, tough, resilient, reliable yet casual icon who was, in reality, mostly Aboriginal.

But today, thousands of Aboriginal people in communities across Australia are living in poverty as a direct result of the harsh reality of how those stockmen and thousands of other workers were treated by governments throughout most of the last century.

People whose entire lives were under direct and complete control of government, workers who only ever saw rations in exchange for their labour and never saw or controlled a cent of their own hard-earned money which in Queensland at least, was paid by their employers to the Government.

Since the first 'Protection Act' was written in 1897 almost every aspect of Aboriginal lives, including their wages and savings, was under the control of government legislation, bureaucracy and policing.

Between 1897 and 1971 the Queensland Government enacted these laws so it could declare any Aboriginal a ward of the state and confine them to a mission or settlement reserve like the one I come from at Palm Island.

Palm Island is the largest Aboriginal community on government-controlled land in a state where my people are still living with the legacy of government who took complete control of our work, wages, savings and even our children.

Other Australian states and territories had similar laws.

From the 1940s and beyond the Queensland Government took child endowment and other social security payments into an existing system of Aboriginal trust accounts which were in turn routinely 'loaned' or just taken into the general revenue.

By 1968 the government controlled 5000 workers and their private savings worth \$11 million from which individuals and families were routinely denied permission to make withdrawals under a system which was well-established and has been well-documented.

By establishing and maintaining this system of controls the government was legally accountable for the health and wellbeing of every Aboriginal child and adult in its care.

It had a legal duty always to act in their best interests.

The 'stolen wages' issue was and is the aftermath of this system which exploited Aboriginal earnings for government profit and condemned our families and communities to utter destitution.

It was a system riddled with fraud, negligence and misappropriation.

A system known to be defective but never fixed.

A system which operated without the knowledge of those whose finances and lives were hostage to it.

On Palm Island in 1970 there were 165 homes for 1300 people - few had fridges, cupboards or beds.

Our store routinely ran out of milk or fresh food and there was massive infection from substandard living conditions and malnutrition caused by an epidemic.

According to our hospital records at that time, 75% of our child outpatients were severely underweight.

When I was a young man on Palm Island in the early 1980s the phrase 'stolen wages', was used in my community by those who knew they had worked, knew they had been paid and wanted to know where it had gone.

Ten years later, when I made my first move into politics and was elected as Mayor for the Palm Island community in 1994, they were still talking about it, still asking where the money had gone and it was still an issue then as it is today.

At the time a lot of younger people in the community were saying they wanted a change of leadership because a lot of our old people were so used to the colonial system of the manager and the superintendent.

Even older people were saying they needed new leadership in the community and they wanted younger people to take charge and re-direct the community's direction.

It was that which taught me to also listen to the older people in the community when they talked about their issues particularly in regards to their wages and earnings and the government.

And I think it's with that I've taken on this passion.

I'm not directly affected in regards to my bank accounts being controlled but the people around me - those I live and shop with in my community - are deeply affected by it.

A constant throughout of all of the past 20 or more years for me has been talk about the stolen wages across kitchen tables and around campfires.

So I took the fight on, mostly at the state level and particularly for most of the last year to year and a half while there has been a full-on campaign with the Queensland Government.

This issue has affected my life, as it has the many who have been before me and the legacy we know it will leave with our people as it has done to now.

Archives show the theft and misappropriation of wages, which were paid to the government in good faith by pastoralists and employers, was knowing and deliberate.

In the 1950s almost \$225,000 of Palm Island child endowment funds were diverted to build a hostel for visitors and outpatients in Townsville - that hostel is still held by the government to this day under a land trust arrangement.

Our people don't forget these things.

Family and community poverty, anger and despair can be traced to the illegal withholding of these wages, savings and entitlements every other Australian worker reasonably expected to control for themselves.

It's not 'hand out' money but hard earned money. Money paid on the widespread understanding that it would be used for the benefit of the people who earned it.

It went into accounts with names like 'the welfare fund' attached to them, so people thought that money was being used for the benefit of the individuals and communities who had earned it.

The records show this was simply not true and so today we find we are still fighting for these 'stolen wages'.

There is another dimension of the stolen wages which is about under award rates and goes back to when the missions and reserves were 'handed back' to Aboriginal people in the early 1980s.

Up until that time Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander government employees on missions and reserves were paid under the award rates, something my own people on Palm Island took a lead role in when they sought to force the Queensland government to abide by its own industrial laws.

It was my community that started a legal challenge over that issue which has since paid \$7000 to our people under similar circumstances to the current offer in that this payment also had a legal indemnity attached to it.

Those who led that campaign took the Queensland Government to the Human Rights Commission for their missing money from 1975 right up to 1984 when the community was handed back control.

That \$7000 payment was the umpire's - HREOC's - decision, not the Governments, and it seems unbelievable that today, some people who worked up to 30 years might only be paid \$4000 for their labour under what the Government now calls a 'generous' offer.

It took a lot of people a lot of campaigning for these workers' claims to be taken seriously.

In January 1986 the Transport Workers Union admitted its failure as a trade union during the previous 15 years because it had not applied its full might to the plight of these workers who were illegally underpaid by the Queensland government.

The government did not budge on this issue until it was threatened with court action by half-a-dozen unions.

Yet even today, for many of our workers, these issues have not yet been resolved.

The stolen wages and savings of Aboriginal people is an industrial issue.

The workers who helped to build this nation have been refused due process accorded to all other workers.

We need unions to reignite their resolve of the mid-1980s and help us on this issue.

It is not rhetoric, it's real.

The stolen wages were dubbed 'stolen' not as a publicity exercise but because they were just that - the amounts in people's savings books or records at the 'end' of the Protection Act period were not what they should have been.

One of our elders in Brisbane tells the story of going to the government after being forced to work for a number of years to find she had just few pounds to collect.

This woman, along with many others, fought for a decade or more to try and find out what happened to the rest of their money and to find ways of somehow getting it back not just for themselves but for their kids and their families as any other working person could reasonably expect.

The stolen wages are not hand outs but hard earned Aboriginal wages.

After more than 70 years of forced labour, intercepted wages and lost or stolen savings the total missing amounts to over \$500 million.

The current government offer to our workers is only \$55.6 million or up to \$4000 for each worker - at least for those who were alive at the time the offer was made on May 9 last year.

It's an insult as far as we're concerned. A big insult.

The stolen wages are documented facts which weren't taken to court because our people did wait, in good faith, for the promise of a negotiated outcome.

By the early 1990s, in Wayne Goss' era, a substantial number of my people were waiting in good faith for the government to negotiate an outcome - a process which was held up by people's lack of knowledge of their own circumstances.

Premier Peter Beattie has said this issue has been going on for a long time now, which it has, and our old people are dying, which they are and have...

By the year 2000 the team charged with negotiating an outcome on the matter was talking about offers of between \$150m and \$250m being fair but in May last year Beattie walked into a meeting with a document called 'Without Prejudice', put it on the table, and said that was his final offer - take it or leave it.

In other words - take this, or take us to court.

But the government knows most workers do not have access to their financial records and therefore most of them are denied the ability to make an informed decision.

Premier Beattie claims this offer for reparations is made in the spirit of reconciliation and yet he demands each claimant must first indemnify the government against any common law or other legal actions open to them to redress this past injustice.

If insurance giant HIH had offered a 'take it or leave it' pittance as compensation to its victims and demanded a signed indemnity there would be an outcry - no institution or government would contemplate such an abuse of process for any other sector of Australian society.

The Beattie Government's offer at this point in time, remains unchanged despite a long and hard-fought campaign by community groups last year for a better deal.

That campaign successfully drew the attention and support of the Queensland Council of Unions and the Human Rights & Equal Opportunity Commission.

The stolen wages have also been discussed at a number of national forums including the national ACTU Indigenous conference, the National Union of Students conference, the Charles Perkins Memorial Lecture, the Treaty Conference and other forums.

But a three-year process for paying out the offer is now in place.

My people - my elders and their families - are not actually seeking large amounts - what they want is an honest settlement which acknowledges the value of their work and the pain of their deprivation.

To most of our people this offer wasn't and isn't about money although many of them will now accept this offer forced by circumstance.

At the core of it always was and always will be recognition and acknowledgement - that same respect that all of our workers and unions in this country have fought long and hard for.

All the assumptions that Aboriginal people didn't work and lived on handouts have been built on the misinformation surrounding this issue and now, today, on the lack of respect and recognition which has accompanied this current offer.

We worked, in our thousands.

We helped to make this country what it is today.

But they took our money and our security for that and then they blamed us for our poverty.

The indemnity which goes with the current Queensland offer makes this offer about money but to my people now the money is now just a small part of it because it's also about allowing people to get up and tell their story about what happened to them.

This would be similar to what the stolen generations or Mandela tried to achieve in South Africa with the Truth & Reconciliation Commission where people were able to talk about what happened in that regime.

I think that should happen in this country for our old people and for people to hear what a lot of them don't want to hear - but it has to be told.

It's their story, it's our story and it has to be told.

Other elements of the offer, such as Parliamentary acknowledgement should happen anyway and regardless of whether people accept this or not.

There's another \$9m, separate to the \$55.6m offer, known as The Welfare Fund.

The Welfare Fund was the result of yet another tax on the wages and savings of our people which was siphoned off from the those accounts.

Back in 1990 when Wayne Goss was Premier, Ann Warner who was the Minister at the time, held an internal inquiry on the wages issue which produced a report confirming a lot of fraud on savings accounts.

The report said the Welfare Fund in particular was so poorly managed the government cashed in investments to keep it going and even though there was nearly \$19 million in the Fund in 1990, there was only \$5.5 million left in it three years later when the government was forced to stop using it.

As a result of that report that particular account was frozen in 1993.

Premier Beattie said as part of this offer they would use what is now \$9m to put road signs up throughout Queensland about whose country you're going to be travelling through or provide educational tools for schools.

If the Department of Education is so concerned about educating the wider community in regards to the Aboriginal atrocities that happened in this state then they should develop something within the Queensland Education budget rather than using our money.

If they want to put signs up on roads they should use the Department of Transport's dollars to do that, not our money.

This goes on and on and on in Queensland, as part of a process where they say on one hand they'll give the money back but on the other hand they'll spend it on what should be their normal core business as government.

That astounds me, particularly with the support Aboriginal people have given the Labor movement around the country not only in recent times but back in the early days when there were a lot of Labor people involved in our issues and a lot of Aboriginal people who supported them back.

A report on the situation with wages and savings in all states is being established by a team of legal, academic and other researchers out of a concern that the massive contribution of Aboriginal workers to our nation's development will be 'whitewashed' from our national history.

A group of people is trying to organise this research to find out where this is at in each state with the idea of putting up some kind of framework or strategy nationally so at the very least so people know about this.

Because in every state there is a similar history.

Fortunately these days, floggings are a thing of the past and few people are knowingly malnourished as a deliberate and direct result of government policy.

If they speak in a language other than English they would not expect to have their head shaved.

They would not expect to be forced to wear nothing but a flour sack as a uniform and if a child broke a pencil in school they would not expect to be jailed indefinitely or moved to another community as punishment.

When they line up for their lunch they expect, along with everyone else, to have an equal chance of what is on offer, not just what is left after the bosses and their families have picked through it.

These days people expect to have access to health care, decent living arrangements and to have a certain amount of freedom in their movements.

They don't need to ask permission to travel, they don't need to ask anyone who they can or can't associate with or marry.

No one in this century has had to renounce their country, their people, their family to have those privileges bestowed on them.

Yet this has been our people's experience as Aboriginal workers and we will not forget that.

This is a national workers issue. The wealth of the state and the pastoral industry can be measured by the poverty of those who were forced to labour for financial security Australians other than themselves now enjoy.

It's not taxpayers money, it's not a handout - it's their own and our community's hard earned money - and it was stolen.

It is time to set the record straight .

Thank you.