

Stolen Wages Update

PRODUCED FOR THE ABORIGINAL COORDINATING COUNCIL NEWSLETTER JUNE 2003

Stolen wages a national issue

In the wake of the Beattie Government's 'final' offer for stolen wages reparations last year a surge of support for Aboriginal workers in Queensland from unions and community groups across the country has led to a national call for the wider community to make themselves aware of the stolen wages issue and support a campaign for wage justice.

The Queensland Government formalised its 'Without Prejudice' offer for stolen wages reparations in November last year, starting a three-year process for paying individual claimants either \$2000 or \$4000 in February.

Since then information and history about the stolen wages as a workers' issue has been added to webpages by Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation (ANTaR), the Queensland Council of Unions (QCU), Victoria Trades Hall and others in the lead up to a major public awareness campaign to be launched from Brisbane in early August.

ACC executive member Alf Lacey said while it was generally accepted most people would take the offer because of circumstance, the conditions of the current offer could

still be changed with the backing of other workers and wider spread community understanding of the issues involved.

"The Queensland coalition of Indigenous organisations and our supporters have always argued the offer was not good enough but we've also always taken the position that we would support our people in whatever they decided to do," he said.

"They've left our people little choice but one thing clear over the past few months has been the Government has done this because they thought they would get away with it.

"But with the unions and ANTaR undertaking to launch a major public awareness campaign over the next few months we are confident that situation can change."

Mr Lacey said while people had waited for and expected the current payment on offer it would be unfair of the government to withdraw it.

"It should be a down payment and there should be broader scope for families to claim for deceased relatives," he said.

Union support solid

Australian Council of Trade Unions National President Sharan Burrow said the ACTU and unions supported the issue because it was a workers issue.

"It's about wages that have been stolen from indigenous people who justly earned them and it's time it was put to rest," she said.

"The ACTU will work with the QCU in regard to activities in Queensland and therefore activities designed to influence the Queensland Government.

"More broadly we will raise this issue through our own executive and at the ACTU Congress in August so that all unions, whether they are state or federal unions or rights campaigners, understand the seriousness of the issue and the fact that it is union business because it's a workers issue."

Ms Burrow also said the first stage of the public awareness campaign, in the form of a set of postcards, had her full support.

"The postcards will form an integral part of both the public awareness



MELBOURNE: ACC Executive Member Alf Lacey with ACTU National President Sharan Burrow during May Day week this year

campaign and putting pressure back on the Queensland Government," she said. "They will be distributed through unions but we'll also make a feature of them with an associated recommendation which we'll negotiate with indigenous representatives for the ACTU Congress in August."

Broad campaign plan from ANTaR

ANTaR National Coordinator David Cooper there were a number of ways their organisation was willing and able to support the campaign.

"At a national level one of the main things ANTaR can do is raise public awareness on the issue through our national supporters and through the activities of all the state ANTaRs," he said.

"We already have information on our website about the issue and we can keep that updated and that links with the ANTaR Qld website which has a lot of information on it.

"We can also help with specific initiatives that might be required in terms of getting public meetings together and running those on a national scale and national events that might be proposed.

"We can lobby politicians both at a state and federal level and we can make sure our member organisations are aware of the issue and encourage them to also help in advocating the issue and sending letters to politicians and various key people." He said ANTaR nationally had made the issue one of their top priorities for the year.

WHAT THEY SAID...

"The ACTU and unions along with the QCU support this issue because it's a workers' issue," ACTU National President Sharan Burrow

"The postcard campaign would be something we could definitely support through our very large database of supporters," ANTaR National Co-ordinator David Cooper

"ANTaR Qld is quite definite about continuing to support this campaign, at our executive meeting last night we proposed to make available small amounts of funds, up to \$200 for communities or individuals to write in and tell us how they're going to publicise the stolen wages issue," ANTaR Qld Vice-President Margaret Hardy




"We're supporting it because fundamental to the issue of social justice is economic justice and the economic justice link is very very simple. We think that the land issue is also quite clear but it's not as clear as a money issue so we're certainly prepared to support a stolen wages campaign because we believe the wages were not paid and that they ought to be paid," ANTaR Victoria Project Worker Frank Hytten

"We see the issue as a wage justice issue, we acknowledge that the way that the records were held and the way this whole issue was handled many many years ago often makes it difficult to get accurate records but at the same time we don't believe that that is an excuse to offer what we believe is not enough. We can't be completely disparaging because at least they have done something but I think we support the indigenous community in seeing this as a first step and that this is not the end of obtaining wage justice for indigenous workers," QCU Secretary Grace Grace

"This union and community campaign has my 100 per cent support and there's been a lot of work put in by the ACC and executive members on this issue so I'd like to thank them for that because this means a lot to all our people," ACC Chair Thomas Hudson (Kowanyama)

2002-2003 TIME LINE...

2002

- May 9..... Premier Peter Beattie makes a 'take it or leave it' reparations offer aimed at resolving the issue of Aboriginal peoples' stolen wages and savings in Queensland.
- May 16..... The offer, called 'Without Prejudice', is reported on the front page of the Courier-Mail after it is leaked to media. Mr Beattie tells Parliament it's a "generous" offer he had wanted elderly people to consider without the "static of an emotional public debate". Judy Spence tells Parliament she believes "the lack of resolution of the Welfare Fund issue has been the greatest obstacle inhibiting the Queensland Government and Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander people achieving true reconciliation".
- 
- June 6..... ANTaR Qld hosts a public meeting in Brisbane chaired by 4AAA's Tiga Bayles and attended by ACC Executive members Alf Lacey, Moira Bosen & Ken Bone, FAIRA's Bob Weatherall, Grassroots Murri Action Group members including Ettie Gleeson & Florence Tetuira, ATSIC Chairperson Pat Thompson, elders including Aunty Ruth Hegarty & Aunty Beryl Wharton and about 150 others. Six resolutions are passed rejecting the offer itself and the process through which it was determined. The coalition of Indigenous organisations (and others) is formed.
- July 2..... A petition calling for renegotiation of the offer is launched from FAIRA by claimant Viola Tuahine and the coalition of Indigenous organisations including ACC Executive member the late Lloyd Fourmile.
- August 3..... Rally and march held from the Roma St Forum to Musgrave Park. More than 10 speakers including ACC Councillors Alfred Lacey and Peter Yeatman, FAIRA's Bob Weatherall, GMAG, Alex Gator, ATSIAB's Aunty Ruth Hegarty, Greens spokesperson Drew Hutton and historian Dr Ros Kidd are heard by more than 200 people including members of a Melbourne-based union group Australian Asia Worker Links (AAWL). Members of AAWL ask Alfred Lacey if he will go to Melbourne to speak to trade unions.
- 
- August 7..... Independent MPs Liz Cunningham and Peter Wellington accept the petition as signed by 2899 residents of Queensland.
- August 9..... The 'consultation' deadline is reached and a report from QAILSS is released claiming a 96 per cent "acceptance rate" - numerically only 21 per cent of eligible claimants accepted the offer.
- September 3..... ACC Full Council Meeting in Townsville rejects the offer and the consultation process. All state parliamentarians receive kits containing information and news clippings on the Stolen Wages.
- November 8..... Human Rights Commissioner Bill Jonas appeals to Cabinet to reconsider the offer before it is agreed on by Cabinet.
- November 14.... Union representatives Grace Grace (Queensland Council of Unions) & Barbara Williams (National Tertiary Education Union) and coalition members Aunty Ruth Hegarty & Joanne Willmot meet with Minister Judy Spence and a number of her staff. The Minister refuses to consider further negotiation.
- November 20.... Community meeting held at Jagera in South Brisbane is addressed by QCU Secretary Grace Grace, ATSIC Commissioner Robbie Williams, coalition members and Aunty Ruth Hegarty who left the meeting to cross the river and to hear Cabinet's announcement confirming the offer. She reports back to meeting that the offer has been confirmed as unchanged since May.
- 
- November 27.... Participants from a rally outside of Parliament House turn their backs on Peter Beattie when he speaks in Parliament. A GMAG spokesperson tells the media "he has insulted us, we have insulted him back".

...THE WAY IT HAPPENED...

- November 29.... QCU executive meeting passes a resolution supporting former indigenous workers, describing the offer and process as "inadequate" and calling on the government to renegotiate.
- December 4..... Former Justice Marcus Einfeld describes the offer as using "bullying tactics" by "blackmailing people to accept a situation where they would lose or die before seeing any of (their) money".



Normanton elder Fred Edwards agreed to have his photograph on a poster for the E-Petition (below) and is also happy to be a part of the postcard campaign. Born onto a station and forced to work as soon as he was able, he says he isn't asking for much but if it has to be a token amount he should also be allowed to claim his deceased father's and brother's earnings.

2003

- January 13..... E-Petition, sponsored by MP Anna Bligh, is launched on the Queensland Parliament webpages. Principal Petitioner is National Tertiary Education Union State Secretary Howard Guille.
- January 20..... Human Rights Lawyer Helen Burrows calls for a national report into each state and territory's practices in relation to Aboriginal workers' wages and savings.
- March 5..... Civil Libertarian Terry O'Gorman warns lawyers the Queensland Government's tender process for offering 'independent' legal advice to claimants may be flawed.
- March 11..... Descendants of "Elley" Bennett, who died in 1981, lodge a writ with the Supreme Court claiming \$18m for unpaid and missing prize money earned by, and withheld from the former boxer.
- March 22..... Rights campaigner and artist the late Gloria Beckett announces she will reluctantly accept the offer due to terminal illness.
- April 13..... E-Petition closes with 710 signatures on it. A few days earlier Judy Spence told an ACC Full Council Meeting DATSIP had received just 1000 applications for the offer.
- April 28-May 2.. (May Day Week) ACC Executive member Alfred Lacey travels to Melbourne, taking the QCU resolution from November 2002 with him. Response is overwhelmingly supportive with commitments to support the stolen wages campaign as a workers issue from unionists and activists at local to national level.
- June 25..... At another national level, in a speech to the Federal Senate, Democrats Senator John Cherry tells his colleagues he will speak to them about the stolen wages issue "until justice for these Indigenous workers, to their satisfaction, is delivered by governments".

Resolutions and Statements of Support

ACC Full Council Meeting 3 September 2002

Indigenous Union Conference Statement 11 September 2002

QCU Executive 29 November 2002

Australia Asia Worker Links Public Meeting 29 April 2003

Victorian Trades Hall Council Resolution 2 May 2003

Socialist Alliance National Executive 30 June 2003

National Indigenous Postgraduate Association Aboriginal Corporation (NIPAAAC) 24 June 2003

Full text of the above resolutions and statements are available on the Qld Council of Unions (<http://www.qcu.asn.au/>), ANTaR Qld (<http://www.antar.dovenetq.net.au>) and other webpages - see 'Who to contact for more information' over page for more info.

WHAT THEY SAID...

"I think all workers around the country are appalled to know and to learn that indigenous workers were firstly paid low rates of pay but then in many cases never received that money. We support the stolen wages campaign because the offer from the Queensland Government offer is insufficient and inadequate and it doesn't compensate for the loss that's been suffered. We'll do what we can, it's a blot on Australia that such a large group of workers were so badly exploited over a long period of time," Victorian Trades Hall Secretary Leigh Hubbard

"Our workers were never afforded the same due processes in regards to their wage claims as whitefellas so the solidarity and support we now have from other workers on this issue is very welcome. The discriminatory acts being practised by Beattie are the same as those which created this situation - he has deliberately denied Aboriginal people a fair and just outcome and all workers should be outraged about this. It's a breach of industrial democracy and it's been an absolute disgrace," FAIRA Project Officer Bob Weatherall

"I'm pleased the trade union movement has joined the campaign for equity and wages justice for Aboriginal workers and I'll continue with this until it reaches a conclusion that meets the wishes of those people who have the prime interest in stolen wages, welfare fund and associated accounts," Uncle Bob Anderson

"People were getting frustrated because very soon we're all going to be taking that money but we need to know from the unions that there's reason for us to keep on fighting for this. It was almost like a fait accompli and with our recent losses everything had gone quiet but what we need now is that push and I'm looking forward to that strategy forum at the beginning of August. It may be from there we'll be able to move this forward and that's good enough for me - a lot of people were thinking it's all over but I think once we raise the interest again out there it will make people feel good," Aunty Ruth Hegarty

Future action!

Unions (ACTU, QCU, VTHC & others) and Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation (ANTaR) will work towards consolidating support nationally and activating a mass public awareness campaign.

August 6-7: Queensland's coalition of Indigenous organisations will host and organise a major strategy meeting for future directions and hold a media event to launch the postcard campaign and fighting fund.

August 8: Rally in Brisbane

For more information see contacts list below.

August 18-21: ACTU National Congress will discuss the stolen wages as a workers issue.

Ongoing:

Unions and ANTaR will build on expressions of solidarity and support from mainstream organisations to pressure the Beattie Government into changing the conditions of the current offer in ways which will include easing the indemnity and removing the eligibility date set for families of claimants (the current offer states only those who were alive after 9 May 2002 are eligible).

A National Report is being developed and will hopefully be launched this year. It will report into work and wages in every state and territory.



Coalition member Alf Lacey rallies for support and solidarity at the 3000-strong May Day March in Melbourne this year

What is Australia Asia Worker Links?

AAWL has been doing international solidarity work for 24 years supporting unions and workers struggling for justice in the Asia Pacific region.

"We help unions and their organisations make links with unions in other regions," says AAWL Project Officer Manrico Moro. "We help do exchange visits so people travel to other countries to meet their counterparts and we've done some training whereby people would come here or go to other countries to spend time in actual workplaces learning the different parts of union work. "We have also supported Indigenous struggles in Australia and other countries in the region for a long time."

While visiting Brisbane from Melbourne last year, Mr Moro (pic-



tured left in orange shirt) heard about the Stolen Wages Rally on August 3 and went along. He said after hearing the speeches at the Roma St Forum he realised the stolen wages was something more people, particularly in the southern states, should know about so he approached coalition member Alf Lacey about travelling to Melbourne to speak to unions.

Mr Moro said AAWL would support the stolen wages campaign until it was resolved to the satisfaction of the workers involved.

"They can count on us to keep working on this," he said.

WHO TO CONTACT FOR MORE INFORMATION:

Keep up to date with developments and find out what you can do from the following people and organisations:

The Queensland coalition of Indigenous organisations who are: FAIRA: (07) 3391 4677: <http://www.faira.org>

ACC: (07) 4044 2999: <http://www.accq.org.au> Also the Grassroots Murri Action group and other supporters.

For email information and contacts or to join a Stolen Wages Update list write to chowes@hotmail.net.au

The Queensland Council of Unions: (07) 3846 2468: <http://www.qcu.asn.au>

ANTaR Qld: (07) 3844 9800 <http://www.antar.dovenetq.net.au> Contact: antarqld@dovenetq.net.au

Australia Asia Worker Links: <http://www.aawl.org.au> Contact: aawl@aawl.org.au

Background Information: Dr Ros Kidd: <http://www.linksdisk.com/roskidd>