**Learning from History**

**1946 Pilbara Aboriginal Stockmen’s Strike**

In this edition we continue the theme of learning from the lessons that the actions of previous generations of Aboriginal political activists have provided for us. This time I will briefly examine the1946 Pilbara strike in Western Australia, which was one of the most significant Aboriginal political actions in the 20th Century. It was a very important moment in black history. The ingenious organisation and tactics deployed by the leaders of the strike led one historian to observe that it was ‘noteworthy not only as an early effort by Aboriginal workers at collective organization. It must also rank as Australia’s longest strike and one of the few which has involved both a fundamental challenge to management control and an alternative vision of freedom from that control.’ There are also some who say that the Pilbara strike was a major inspiration for the more famous action by the Gurindjis in the mid-1960s.

The 1946 Pilbara strike in Western Australia had its origins in an extraordinary meeting of two hundred traditional owner representatives of 23 language groups that occurred at Skull Creek in 1942. The meeting lasted six weeks and made a range of decisions to ‘take positive action’ to improve the life of Aboriginal pastoral workers in the Kimberley. The meeting authorized a white man, Don Mcleod, to negotiate on their behalf and appointed as their leaders Nyangumarta man Dooley Bin Bin to represent desert dwellers and Nyamal man Clancy McKenna to represent town settlers. The result was more than two years of frustration as the government authorities and pastoralists refused to deal with McLeod, and refused to listen to the Aboriginal workers.

So, in March 1945 Dooley Binbin travelled around numerous stations on foot, by rail and even by bicycle, to organize the Aboriginal workers. Because many were illiterate he devised an ingenious means of coordinating the action; he drew rough squares on pieces of cardboard and biscuit tin labels and told the people to cross off a square each day until the 1st of May. On that day they were to walk off the cattle station.

The strike went ahead on schedule as Aboriginal workers walked off more than 25 stations on the very day when the new seasons shearing and mustering was due to begin. This move, as well as the stockmen’s decision to appoint communist Don McLeod as their authorized negotiator caused consternation in government and pastoralist circles.

The government’s initial response was to attempt to intimidate the workers by arresting and gaoling their leaders, McKenna, Bin Bin and Mcleod. This tactic backfired in Port Headland where 200 striking workers marched on the gaol when they heard of McLeod’s arrest. They were intent on freeing him; otherwise they were prepared to be locked up with him. On that occasion the situation was only defused when, after stoning the corrugated iron gaol house, they discovered that Mcleod had already been released and they dispersed. Clancy McKenna and Dooley Bin Bin would ultimately serve seven weeks of a three month gaol sentence before being released.

But these tactics failed to intimidate or deter the strikers. They were receiving limited support from certain sections of the labor movement and the Communist Party, but the battle to survive was becoming desperate and McKenna began organizing various self-supporting enterprises and he travelled the district setting up camps as collection points for pearl shell, kangaroo skins and goat skins. The strikers set up schools in at least two of these independent communities and the movement was gaining strength. The leaders would be subjected to arrest and harassment for two more years, but the self-sustaining camps enable many strikers to hold out until 1949 when two big stations caved into the workers demands and eventually the state deputy commissioner for native affairs gave an undertaking that all stations in the Pilbara would accept the strikers demands and most of the workers returned to work.

The undertaking by the deputy commissioner was broken soon after, but as one historian observed, “While the strike did not end exploitation, it limited the extent to which it would be possible to take Aboriginal labour for granted…It is in this sense that the strike is a most significant event in Australian Labor history.”

The 1946 Pilbara strike can also be regarded as a part of the inspiration underpinning the better known Gurindji walk-off at Wave Hill Station in the Northern Territory some 20 years later in 1966. If the Gurindji strike is to be considered as the birth of the modern Land Rights movement, then the Pilbara strike should be regarded as an equally significant prelude to Wave Hill.

In my column next month I shall examine some of the significant events of the 1950s from which we might draw some lessons for today. These events will include the 1951 Darwin Aboriginal Workers Strike, the establishment of the Australian Aboriginal Fellowship in Sydney in 1957 and the formation of the first national Aboriginal organization in Adelaide in 1958. Until then you might like to reflect on what are some of the important lessons that are emerging from this series about the political history of our continuing struggle for justice.

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