

## Northern Territory Council for Aboriginal Rights Communist Party of Australia Gurindji walk-off and Strike Brian Manning Trade Union Movement

From Chris White

As a tribute to Brian Manning, *Links International Journal of Socialist Renewal* highlights one important chapter in his inspiring political life: his important role in the historic struggle of the Gurindji people for their rights.

By **Terry Townsend**

[The following is an excerpt from *The Aboriginal Struggle & the Left* (Sydney: Resistance Books, 2009.)

With the backing of the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU), in 1964 the Australian Workers Union (AWU) and the North Australian Workers Union (NAWU) – which was no longer led by the left, which lost control in 1952, although the militant wharfies' section remained solidly left-wing -- unsuccessfully negotiated with the Northern Territory's pastoralists [cattle ranchers] for full award pay and conditions for Aboriginal stock workers. In 1965, the NAWU applied to the Federal Arbitration Commission. The pastoralists hired none other than John Kerr, QC, who at the time was aligned to the far-right National Civic Council within the Australian Labor Party, to represent them. The federal Liberal government intervened to prevent any award being made which would cover pastoral work on Aboriginal missions and settlements. Kerr put the racist argument that Aborigines -- despite having been the backbone of the industry's workforce for generations -- still needed training, because "a significant proportion ... is retarded by tribal and cultural reasons from appreciating in full the concept of work". The commission's March 1966 decision, while accepting much of the bosses' and government's arguments, also reflected the pressure of public opinion in support of the Aboriginal people. In a "compromise" ruling, the commission ruled that all NT Aboriginal stock workers were to receive equal pay -- but not until December 1968.

The Federal Council for the Advancement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders (FCAATSI) denounced the decision. During the case, FCAATSI unsuccessfully sought to make a submission in support of the workers, held demonstrations outside the hearings, produced a pamphlet for trade unionists exposing the racism against rural Indigenous workers, and sponsored a campaign to deluge the commission, the pastoralists and the leader of the federal Country Party with letters.

### **Communist support**

The focus of the struggle again shifted to independent activity of the Indigenous people themselves, and again the Communist Party of Australia (CPA), left-wing trade unionists and the socialist left offered vital support. The NT Council for Aboriginal Rights (NTCAR), in which communists George Gibbs and Brian Manning were leading members, played a crucial role. Gibbs was secretary of the NAWU's militant waterside workers' section, whose executive had a CPA majority. Manning was a wharfie and secretary of the CPA branch. The Darwin waterside workers had maintained their strong support for Aboriginal people's rights that began in the 1920s.

In 1962, "Wild Bill" Donnelly, a CPA activist, travelled to Sydney to report to the Waterside Workers Federation conference on the local campaign to defend Peter Australia, an Aboriginal wharfie who had been jailed for 12 months for giving an Aboriginal friend a glass of wine. The campaign was successful and Peter Australia was released by federal cabinet after serving for months (Bernie Brian, "Bill Donnelly: 'Most Dangerous Man in Darwin'", *Worker's Journal*, Maritime Union of Australia, Spring 2003).

An ASIO document in 1962 reported in great detail the so-called "penetration" of Aboriginal organisations by Communists and detailed that in Darwin, communists George Gibbs and Brian Manning had helped establish "the NT Aboriginal Rights Council in 1962" [in fact, according to Manning, the NT Council for Aboriginal Rights was formed in December 1961] and were on its council, while every member of its executive was "a full-blood aboriginal".

According to a 1965 ASIO document ("Communist Party of Australia Activity in the Northern Territory", in the National Archive of Australia) the CPA had "a powerful influence" in the NTCAR, with not only three committee members being in the CPA but also its Aboriginal assistant secretary Terence Robinson "was reliably reported to be a member [of the CPA] in 1963". At the 1964 Darwin May Day march, the NTCAR organised more than 400 Aboriginal workers and family members to march behind placards that proclaimed "Equalwork, equal rights, equal pay". A photo of the

contingent, taken from the CPA's *Tribune* newspaper, adorned the cover of FCAATSI's Equal Wages Committee's pamphlet, *The Facts on wage Discrimination Against Aborigines*.

### **NT Council for Aboriginal Rights**

Angry at the Arbitration Commission's March 1966 decision to delay equal pay for three years, and disappointed by the NAWU's poorly prepared case, Aboriginal activists in the NT Council for Aboriginal Rights (NTCAR) sought to take matters into their own hands. Dexter Daniels, an NTCAR activist and NAWU organiser, and his brother Davis, secretary of NTCAR and an orderly at the Darwin Hospital, discussed the situation with Gurindji leader Vincent Lingiari, who just happened to be in the hospital at the time. Reluctantly, NAWU secretary Paddy Carroll agreed to the Daniels' and Lingiari's proposal for a protest strike, but was opposed to it involving more than one station, as Dexter Daniels was calling for. (Manning, Brian 2002, 'A Blast from the Past: An Activist's Account of the Wave Hill Walk-off', 6th Vincent Lingiari Memorial Lecture, delivered on August 23, 2002, Northern Territory University, <http://indigenoustrights.net.au/files/f81.pdf>.)

The NTCAR now organised to push the action beyond the 'token' protest acceptable to the 'moderate' NAWU leadership and extend the strike to the larger cattle stations. As Brian Manning pointed out, 'the main exploiters of skilled Aboriginal labour were the large absentee landlord holdings, [such as] Vestey's Wave Hill and Australian Estate's Victoria River Downs, [at] the time the two largest properties in the Northern Territory'. The NTCAR decided 'to canvass the feelings of workers on the larger properties by sending a deputation on a fact finding tour to get first-hand information. Nick, a Greek [Pagonis] wharfie took some leave from his job and with Dexter Daniels and Clancy Roberts, also a Roper River Man and Rights Council committee member, set out to tour the major stations: Victoria River Downs, Wave Hill and Helen Springs, another Vestey's property south of Katherine... At Wave Hill they found Vincent Lingiari ... [who] was eager to take action ... At [Victoria River Downs] Dexter spoke with traditional owner and leader 'King Brumby', he too was prepared to join the strike.

In June 1966, the Gurindji people at began their historic 'walk-off', establishing a strike camp on the banks of the Victoria River near the Wave Hill settlement.

Brian Manning and the Darwin wharfies organised ongoing supplies for the strikers, making at least 15 return trips from Darwin on appalling roads. 'There were a number of Darwin wharfies who rotated to run supplies to the Gurindji over the next few months. Paul Patten, Barry Reed, Nick Pagonis, Jack Phillips and George Gibbs who made more trips than anyone else', said Manning. The very first two-day run was made by Manning, Dexter Daniels and Robert Tudawali, the Aboriginal actor who starred in Charles Chauvel's film *Jedda* and the television series *Whiplash*. Tudawali was vice-president of the NTCAR.

See [www.gurindjifreedomday.com.au](http://www.gurindjifreedomday.com.au)

The NTCAR also worked to raise the profile of the strike, which was receiving coverage in the national press 'thanks to noted Australian author Frank Hardy's contacts in the media and letters the Council for Aboriginal Rights had sent to Unions seeking financial support... Frank Hardy was active in Sydney gaining publicity and organising press conferences' (Manning 2002). CPA member Frank Hardy chronicled the events in his book *The Unlucky Australians*. Negotiations dragged on during the wet season, and the NTCAR threatened to would pull every worker off every station when the wet broke.

The CPA, through Actors Equity and other left unions, sponsored a speaking tour of the southern capitals in October 1966 by Dexter Daniels and Lupnagiari (also known as 'Captain Major'), a Gurindji strike leader from the Newcastle Waters station. FCAATSI organised a national campaign in support of the strikers. The Waterside Workers Federation's Sydney Branch hosted Lupnagiari on a trip to Brisbane and Townsville, while Dexter continued to address job meetings in Sydney before their return to Darwin after about four or five weeks. The FCAATSI Equal Wages Committee appealed for support and left-wing unions and Trades and Labour Councils responded, providing considerable financial support throughout the strike. The Australasian Meat Industry Employees Union declared a black ban on handling cattle from Newcastle Waters and Wave Hill.

In March 1967, the Gurindji moved en masse to a place in the centre of their land, Daguragu, or Wattie Creek. With the help of Hardy, the workers drafted a petition to Governor-General Lord Casey for the return of most of the Wave Hill pastoral lease, which was in the hands of the giant British

corporation Vestey's. To nobody's surprise, the G-G refused the request.

The NTCAR provided a brick-making machine, building and roofing materials and a water pump. Unions down south also donated building supplies and a Toyota truck. Brian Manning was elected by Darwin wharfies to attend the Waterside Workers Federation's All Ports Conference in Sydney. ``My contribution to the conference was to report on the Wave Hill walk off with reference to the active support by Darwin Waterside Workers in maintaining supplies and to highlight the problem of the Gurindji claim for some of their land and their decision to take some back by fencing it. The Conference decided to recommend to the Rank and File Members, a \$1.00 per member national levy to support the Gurindji claim for their land. This raised \$17,000 dollars, which became the Gurindji 'war chest' in their fight for land'', he recounted (Manning 2002). Frank Hardy wrote a series of articles on the Gurindji struggle in the *Australian* in 1970. On National Aborigines Day 1970, more than 500 people filled the Teachers Federation Auditorium in Sydney to hear Hardy give an impassioned speech urging continued support for their demands. A "Save the Gurindji" committee was formed out of the meeting.

When the federal government offered a lousy eight-square miles for a settlement, the Gurindji continued their land occupation. They were still there in 1972, when the Whitlam Labor government was elected with a promise to legislate in favour of land rights, and a land grant was finally given to the Gurindji at Wattie Creek.

### **Solidarity**

Throughout the strike, the CPA's *Tribune* carried regular reports on the widespread solidarity and support for the Gurindji struggle, often written by Brian Manning and Frank Hardy. In the July 17, 1968, issue alone, there were reports of workers at a Brisbane meatworks meeting and donating \$800 to the strikers, a 1000-strong march in support in Melbourne and another of 100 in Adelaide (Martin, Chris 1995, *Green Left Weekly*, August 9, <https://www.greenleft.org.au/node/11021>). CPA activist Jack Munday, who led the militant NSW Builders Labourers Federation, recounted that ``in the 1960s, the Black movement started to become the second biggest issue after Vietnam ... We knew ... that racism was deep-seated and might be found among our own members, but we decided to fund some [Gurindji people] to come down and speak to us, and acquaint our members with the details of their struggle. We organised demonstrations and talk-ins. These actions were remarkably successful, given the obstacles in our way'' (Jack Munday 1981, *Green Bans and Beyond*, Sydney: Angus & Robertson, p. 42).