

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE STRIKES BY ABORIGINAL WORKERS IN DARWIN, 1947 – 1951.
by Dr William B Day 2019

The historian, C D Rowley describes a series of strikes by Aboriginal workers in Darwin in 1947, 1950 and 1951.¹ Rowley recounts that the first strike by of a largely Aboriginal domestic and town workforce which occurred in February 1947 was a result of poor pay and living conditions in the Berrimah Compound outside Darwin. Rowley suggests the strike followed the experience of equality and improved working and living conditions during the period of occupation by armed forces in the North during World War Two.

Gordon Williams wrote in 1951:

“They do the menial tasks of this peculiar town which appears to be losing all its reason for being, and for the great part work for the Government. They scythe the tall grass around the blazing streets and roads, collect the bottles that give a quaint colour to the footpaths, paddocks, and facades of the rambling village, and generally act as the well-known hewers and drawers ... Until a few months ago many aborigines were living in virtual squalor and in relative deprivation in the Berrimah Compound, a few miles from Darwin.”² [Note:1950s reporting generally used a lower case 'a' for “Aborigine” as a descriptor of First Nation's People].

In November 1950, 200 of the workers living at Berrimah refused to attend their assigned work places in town, in a demand handed over by their leader and spokesperson, Lawrence Urban [Wurrben] The press claimed the strike was broken when strikers were denied transport to their weekly show at the Star Cinema.³

National coverage of the unrest followed a “march on Darwin” on January 17 by striking Berrimah workers armed with sticks and non-lethal weapons. *The Age* newspaper headed a report, “Police Disperse Armed Aboriginal Strikers”. The story continued:

“Darwin Wednesday. - Police at midday today dispersed a group of 32 aboriginal strikers armed with iron rods, pointed sticks and exhaust pipes, who were, in their own words, 'marching on Darwin.' They arrested a strike leader, an aborigine named Lawrence, and striking police police tracker, named Bill Palata, neither of whom resisted...

Today was the third day of the aborigines' strike, and there is no sign of a settlement. It is the longest strike the aborigines have had in the NT. They will not be allotted their usual picture bus

¹ Crowley, C D (1971) *The Remote Aborigines*. Australian National University Press, Canberra, pp292-295.

² Darwin: town of discontent” *The Argus*, March 9, 1951, page 2.

³ Advertiser, 28 November, 1950; *The Argus*, 30 November 1950.

tonight, and the strikers are going without their midday meal.

The strike has not seriously affected normal life in Darwin. Many housewives have to do their own washing, ironing and house cleaning, while some not very important municipal work is being undone.”⁴

The Sydney Morning Herald reported on 18 January, “Police Arrest Leaders of Aboriginal Strike”:

“Darwin, Wednesday. Police today arrested two leaders of party of 32 striking aborigines who were marching on Darwin. The strike began three days ago. The aborigines are demanding [seven pounds] a week and equal rights with whites ... Some of the natives said they were marching on Darwin to see the Director of Native Affairs, Mr F H Moy. Others said they intended using their weapons to force the few natives still working in Darwin to stop.” They vowed they would not resume work until their leaders – Lawrence and a black-tracker named Billy Palata – had been released.”

By the end of the month, Lawrence had been sentenced to three months in Fanny Bay Gaol after pleading not guilty to charges of disobeying a departmental order to stay at the native reserve, and with having been disorderly in Darwin police station.⁵ With Lawrence in jail, his place was taken by a 50-year-old Larrakia elder named Nadpur, otherwise known as Fred Waters.

On 14 February, newspapers across Australia reported that Nadpur had been taken from his home on Darwin's Bagot Reserve and driven to the remote Aboriginal settlement of Haasts Bluff after organising a lightning one-day strike. According to the *Daily Telegraph* (14 February 1951), “This morning a Native Affairs official and a policeman went to Waters' home at Bagot Road reserve to remove Waters. They allowed him a few minutes to pack a swag and farewell his weeping wife and children. Then they drove him to Haast Bluff settlement, 150 miles west of Alice Springs, on the edge of a large desert. Waters, known to his tribe as 'the clever man,' is 50.”⁶

The Age reported, “Freddie 'the Clever Man' Waters is the second strike leader the aborigines have lost ... Freddie has been a 'behind the scenes' man in two previous strikes. He became leader after Lawrence went to gaol...”⁷

⁴ *The Age* 18 January, 1951, page 5.

⁵ “Darwin Native Sent To Gaol” *Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 February 1951, page 4.

⁶ “Native Strike Leader Exiled” *The Daily Telegraph*, 14 February, 1951.

⁷ “Second Native Strike Leaser 'Out of Way.’” *The Age*, 14 February, 1951, page 8.

The Argus described the grief felt by Nadpur's wife, "Maggie", who reportedly, "wept today as she wished for Fred to return to her and their son." the report continued:

"She said she had wanted to go into exile with Fred but he had told her to stay in Darwin, where she knew the people's customs and language. 'Maggy' said she had been married to Fred for 20 years. He had been a good husband.

Government officials claimed that North Australian Union men must have played on 'Maggy's' susceptibilities to cause her outburst. She had been very quiet when Fred had been taken away."⁸

Rowley (page 294) notes that an injunction by the North Australian Workers Union against keeping Waters at Haasts Bluff was rejected by the High Court. Meanwhile the government in Canberra were flooded with letters of complaint against the treatment of the strikers. After thirty years, 222 pages of the original letters have become available to the public on the website of the National Archives of Australia.⁹

During the period of Lawrence's arrest and Waters' banishment Aboriginal residents of the Bagot Reserve refused to perform a dance scheduled for Americans on a visiting ship, the *Stella Polaris*. On 20 February, 1951, *The Daily Examiner* (page 3) headed its report, "No Fred; No Lawrence; No Corroboree." The article stated that a meeting had been held at "Bagot road compound last week" and resolved that no Aboriginal person would take part in the official entertainment for the visitors unless Lawrence and Waters were released.

On 26 March, after six weeks in exile and following a national outcry, Fred Waters was returned in a Native Affairs truck to be reunited with his wife on the Bagot Reserve in Darwin.

In April, 1951, Mr P A McBride replied on behalf of Australian Prime Minister R G Menzies to a letter from the secretary of the Canberra Trades and Labour Council. Mr McBride outlined the beginnings of the Aboriginal strike in Darwin in some detail. The three-page reply from the Prime Minister continued:¹⁰

"I feel that the resolution passed by your council may have been prompted by the much

⁸ "Maggy's' Scared for Fred." *The Argus*, 17 February, 1951, page 7.

⁹ "Fred Waters and Lawrence: Representations on behalf of." Series Number A431, 1950/3697 Part A, Item Barcode 66551, National Archives of Australia, Canberra.

¹⁰ "Fred Waters and Lawrence: Representations on behalf of." Series Number A431, 1950/3697 Part A, Item Barcode 66551, National Archives of Australia, Canberra. Reply from R A McBride on behalf of Prime Minister R G Menzies to Mr Curan, Secretary, Canberra Trades and Labour Council, 27 April, 1951 (3 pages).

publicised case of the Darwin aborigines Lawrence and Waters, and in this connection the following details obtained from reports made by the Administrator of the Northern Territory may be of interest.

The Administrator states that the trouble arose in connection with aboriginals who were housed and cared for in a reservation known as Berrimah on the outskirts of Darwin. The aborigines are encouraged, where able-bodied, to seek employment in the town of Darwin. The Director of Native Affairs prescribes the minimum rates of pay which they shall receive in employment in the town of Darwin, and the natives are free to bargain with their employers. Those engaged in Government employment are paid [two pounds] per week, which is in addition to their housing, food, clothing and transport to and from Darwin, for themselves and dependent wife and children living with them, which are provided at Government expense. The Director considers that, having regard to the limited hours of work and the degree of efficiency of the natives, the remuneration is reasonable.

It appears that on 28th November, 1950, Berrimah aborigines employed in Darwin refused to proceed to work. Their main spokesman was Lawrence Urban, and their demands were for a wage of [seven pounds] per week and equal laws for natives and whites. Discussions were held with the aboriginals by the Native Affairs Department, and on the 30th November, 1950, they all returned to work.

On 15th January, 1951, the aboriginals again refused to proceed to their employment. Their demands were the same as on the previous occasion. Lawrence was the leader and his next assistant was Waters. On 16th January Lawrence led a number of natives around the town and threatened certain natives at their employers' premises that if they did not go out on strike they would be forcibly removed next day. An attempt to put these threats into effect was made on the following day by a group of 30 armed natives marching towards Darwin. They were intercepted by the police and dispersed, Lawrence being arrested. He was charged with a breach of the Observation of Law Ordinance, but the charge was dismissed. On 24th January a similar charge was laid in respect of threats made by Lawrence interfering with the rights of another aborigine, and Lawrence was convicted and sentenced to imprisonment for four months. Lawrence appealed, and pending his appeal being heard, the Director of Native Affairs gave directions that he was to remain on the Baggott [sic] Aboriginal Reservation¹¹ until his appeal was

¹¹ Bagot Reserve was proclaimed in 1938 and reduced in 1965 to a fraction of its original size. In 1979, much of the original reserve was incorporated into the Larrakia Kulaluk Special Purpose Lease of 301 hectares.

determined.

A few short days later Lawrence left the Reservation, entered the prohibited area of Darwin, indulged in intoxicating liquor and offensive behaviour, and he was subsequently sentenced to a further four months imprisonment. Lawrence instructed his solicitor to withdraw his appeal.

Following Lawrence's conviction, Waters took up his role and claimed he was acting with the support of officials of the North Australian Workers' Union. The Administrator, after conferring with the Director of Native Affairs, decided that he could not permit Waters to continue his activities, which were causing disturbance on the Reserve amongst people who were virtually wards of the State, and decide that in the interests of himself and the natives he should be ordered out of Darwin ... it is not considered that the present position calls for the appointment of a Royal Commission, as suggested by your Council.

Yours faithfully

P A McBride for Prime Minister.”

A full-page report by Gordon Williams in *The Argus*, Friday, March 9, 1951 (page 2), is headed, “Darwin: Town of discontent. 'I stand with the natives for a new deal.'” Williams criticises the theory that the strikers were being used by Communists in the union movement. After speaking to Aboriginal people in Darwin, Williams writes:

“...there are very many who are fully aware of the significance of the fight and its cause.

Lawrence, a rangy dissident middle-aged Waugaitj tribesman, and ageing Fred Waters (now in exile at Haast's [sic] Bluff) were their apparent leaders.

I am certain that behind these apparent leaders were and still are more educated, more alert, and much wiser aborigines, who choose the way of darkness, knowing that their appearance as leaders of the betterment move would bring them precisely what it has brought Fred Waters.

I have spoken to aborigines who might well belong to this small company of hidden leaders...

The native strike sprung from a purely native impulse. The very first strike of them all (in 1946) was led by a highly intelligent aborigine who has some Messianic characteristics. This man is still in circulation living a blameless, useful, and purposeful life...”

Prophetically, Gordon Williams wrote:

“The 250 strike-conscious aborigines who recently held stop-work protests against their Government-ordained standard of living have started a new chapter in aboriginal history. They have lit a fire that will – and should – blaze until the conditions of the native population throughout Australia are examined dispassionately, carefully, sympathetically and free of prejudice.”

A BACKGROUND TO THE PERSONALITIES AND POLITICS BEHIND THE DARWIN ABORIGINAL WORKERS' STRIKES

On 23rd February, 1951, M Healy, the General Secretary of the Trades and Labour Council of Queensland wrote to the Minister for the Interior, H L Anthony:¹²

“At a recent meeting of the above Council. Consideration was given to the action of your Department in the Northern Territory of having an Aboriginal named Fred Waters taken from Darwin to Haast Bluff Settlement. The only conclusion we can reach is that Waters was sent to this Settlement as a consequent result of the work he was performing in trying to improve the wages and conditions of the unfortunate Aborigines in the Territory.

According to an article from the *Sydney Sunday Sun*, dated February 18th, over the signature of Olaf Ruhan, Fred Waters is an educated Aborigine, about 50 years old, and speaks English quietly, dresses well. By tribal law he is Regent of the Larrakia tribe, ruling until the hereditary heir, Little Fretwell (sic), now a boy of 14, at Delissaville, takes over. It appears that no native may move through another's territory except he holds special trading rights, or is attending a combined corroboree. Therefore Waters is an alien at Haast Bluff and is liable to die suddenly with a spear in the back...”

The information from the Trades and Labour Council is interesting, in that they claim that Fred Waters was “Regent” for the Larrakia tribe under Larrakia tribal law until “the hereditary heir, Little Fretwell, now a boy of 14, at Delissaville, takes over”. Media reports from 1917 to 1953 detail the succession of leadership amongst the Larrakia people in Darwin, passed on from “King Solomon” to his son Frank, followed by Frank's “abdication” in favour of his brother George, who died in 1945. George's son was designated “Prince of Wales”, often shortened to “Princewel”, with his tribal name being Midpul, sometimes written as “Mudpool” or “Midt-Pul”.

Obviously, “Little Fretwell” mentioned in the above correspondence is the same Larrakia man named as “Prince of Wales” AKA “Midpul” or “Princewel”.listed in a Commonwealth Census of Wards as being born in 1940.¹³ Although acknowledged as a successor to King George, Midpul does not appear to have assumed a leadership role amongst the Larrakia before his death in 2003.¹⁴ He was however, a key figure in the long-running Kenbi land claim to Cox Peninsula, where the community of Belyuen,

¹² “Fred Waters and Lawrence: Representations on behalf of.” Series Number A431, 1950/3697 Part A, Item Barcode 66551, National Archives of Australia, Canberra, 222 pages.

¹³ Register of Wards, *Northern Territory of Australia Government Gazette* No. 19B, May 1957, page 91.

¹⁴ See *Northern Territory News*, Wednesday January 8, 2003, page 4, “Top End loses artist Prince of Wales.” The article states Midpul died on December 27, 2002.

previously known as Delissaville, still stands.¹⁵

In his book, “A Drop of Rough Ted”, Ted Egan reports:

I was in Darwin when Prince of Wales was given his name. The local Darwin tribe, the Larrakia, were in danger of dying out and there was a move by a couple of old blokes, principally Fred Waters (who incidentally led the first Aboriginal strike in Darwin in 1951) to rebuild the strength of the tribe. They initiated quite a few young men, and it was old Fred’s hope to round up the many unattached young fellows in Darwin and make them honorary Larrakia. He collected quite a lot of money to defray expenses, and planned to set Prince up as the new “King”. Hence the name. Tribal politics were not for the irrepressible Prince, however and in all the time I have known him he has just drifted along, always having a bit of a laugh, never taking things too seriously, ever ready to negotiate a loan. Long live the Prince of Wales.

While Ted Egan and his celebrated yarns cannot be regarded as a reliable source, his memory of Fred Waters’ planned expansion of the Larrakia tribe appears to be supported by the note on a 1973 family tree.

A Larrakia genealogy prepared in 1973 notes: “Selma (sic) [Thelma] says: 'When the Woolner, Minija and Larrakia tribes were almost gone, Fred Waters (an elder) said we would be together.' This is emphasised – Woolner, Minija, Larrakia – one people.”¹⁶

In a point-by-point response to a letter complaining of the treatment of Fred Waters, the Minister H L Anthony denounced the complaint, point by point. Under the subheading, “Fred Waters is described as a member of the 'Larrakia' tribe,” the Minister wrote:

“There is no such tribe. 'Larrakeyah' is a Malay word. The Director of Native Affairs has never heard of the Regent of the Larrakia tribe, or of the hereditary heir. Contrary to common belief, there are no 'kings' or 'regents' in any of the tribes. They all became self-appointed kings temporarily during the war, when they found that the souvenir value of a king's spear or woomera was higher than any other, but in effect they do not exist.”¹⁷

Anthropologists would agree that Aboriginal people did not have “kings”, or “queens”; however, the Kenbi Land Claim Book records a leadership succession of the danggalaba clan as claimants on behalf

¹⁵ Belyuen is the name of a sacred spring at the site of the community of the same name. It was also the indigenous name of Frank Solomon.

¹⁶ “Gwalwa Daraniki, Series of correspondence,” Series Number A4252, control symbol 33, National Archives of Australia, Canberra. Pp. 73-78 (Available on NAA website Record Search).

¹⁷ “Fred Waters and Lawrence: Representations on behalf of.” Series Number A431, 1950/3697 Part A, Item Barcode 66551, National Archives of Australia, Canberra. Reply from H.L. Anthony, Minister for Interior to Thomas Sheehan, secretary, Federal Labor Party, 23 April, 1951 (5 pages). Mansfield (2006) gives “Kulumbiringin” as an alternative name for Larrakia.

of all Larrakia. The claim book also records George and Frank as two central claimant ancestors.¹⁸

History also records the prominent role “King George” played in defending Larrakia rights, as did the grandson of Solomon, acknowledged by the author Douglas Lockwood. In 1968, Lockwood wrote:

“If finders were keepers, Darwin would belong to Gwila-marinya, known as Bob Secretary, of the Larrakia tribe of Australian Aborigines. His tribesman, George Mungalo, says: 'Bob Secretary is the big boss of Darwin. This is his country. It belonged to his father before, and that one's father before him ... before the white man came.’”¹⁹

The Minister's reply is surprising considering the years of reporting on supposed Larrakia royalty. In April, 1917, the media reported:

“King Solomon, of the Larrakia tribe, a very picturesque and old Darwin identity, died on Saturday afternoon. Gathering his people round his death bed, he said that when he reached the other side he would cause a big wind to blow and make trouble for the white men, for this country had not been the same since they came.”²⁰

Further details on Larrakia succession were reported later the same month:

“There is said to have been a coronation ceremony at the Aboriginal Compound at Cullen Beach on Sunday last, when “George” was appointed to succeed the late Solomon as King of the Larrakeyahs. Frank, the only son of the dead King, magnanimously waived any claims to the succession – probably doubting his fitness to set a good moral example to his tribe.”²¹

In September the same year, George's marriage to “Kitty” was reported in some detail. In the article, the son of the late King Solomon was dubbed the king's “Private Secretary”, a title that seems to have stuck, in that Frank became better known as “Frank Secretary”, a surname continued by his three children, Bobby, Topsy and Gabriel, all since deceased:

An interesting native wedding was celebrated by the Rev. Father Fanning at the R. C. Chapel on Wednesday evening, 19th instant, when His Majesty King George, of the Larrakeyah tribe, was united in the holy bonds, in accord with the established orthodox Church ritual, to Miss Kitty, who (we understand) was educated at the Convent School..Called upon to make a speech, King George relegated this embarrassing duty to his Private Secretary, Frank Solomon (native cognomen Berryooin,²² a son of the late King Solomon, who on his late father's death some months ago, magnanimously abdicated all right to the succession in favour of his friend George

¹⁸ Brandl, M, Walsh, M and Haritos, A (1979) Kenbi Land Claim, Northern Land Council.

¹⁹ Lockwood, D (1968) *The Front Door: Darwin, 1869 – 1969.*, page102.

²⁰ “A Darwin Solomon's Prophecy,” *Brisbane Courier*, 9 April, 1917.

²¹ *Northern Territory Times and Gazette*, Thursday 19 April, 1917, page 10.

²² Berryooin is probably “Belyuen”, a name for a Larrakia sacred site on Cox Peninsula.

... The Private Secretary's address partook of the character of a lecture to the King, in which he pointed out to that potentate that this young girl had been given to him for a wife by Father Fanning 'white feller' fashion."²³

By 1930, according to a report in the *Northern Standard* in Darwin, George remained, if not “king”, certainly a respected spokesperson. The local newspaper reported:

“When Lady Somers arrived in Darwin she brought a present for Their Majesties the King and Queen of the Larakayah tribe, sent by Mrs J. A. Gilruth, formerly of Darwin. King George, or George King, who is employed by the estate of E. F. Holmes was very proud of his present as was his royal spouse ... Old Darwinites will remember that King George was once an employee of His Excellency the Administrator (J. A. Gilruth) as stable boy, but of late years was employed by the late E. F. Holmes. Frank Solomon, employed by our contemporary, who is a prince of the blood, being son of the former king, renounced his claim to the throne, and the crown went to George.”²⁴

In 1936, King George was instrumental in choosing the site of Darwin's Bagot Aboriginal Reserve, on land later revoked in 1965, and then returned as the Kulaluk Lease in 1979, after eight years of struggle led by Frank's son Gulumarini, better known as Bobby Secretary. *The Northern Standard* reported:

King Ichungarrabilluk (better known as King George) of the once great tribe of Larrakeeyahs, who roamed our foreshores from Point Charles to East point in the day before the white invasion, hunting, fish, dugong, and turtle in their native canoes, called the old men of the tribe together ... King George pointed out that they had heard reports that the Government intended to shift the present compound to some point inland to make way for more Myilly Point residences.²⁵:

King George of the Larrakia, died in Katherine in 1945, when his son, Midpul would have been five years of age. It is likely, then, that Fred Waters, an educated man exempted from the restrictions on

²³ *Northern Territory Times and Gazette*, Thursday, 27 September 1917, page 14. Note: Most likely, in dubbing Frank Solomon AKA Belyuen, as King George's 'Private Secretary' this news report is the origin of the Secretary surname. Alternatively, Frank may have been given his surname because of his employment as “a printer's devil” for the *Territory Times* (see *The Sun*, 13 February 1922, page 7 and Ernestine Hill [[1950] *The Territory*). According to records, the Larrakia name of George King alias King George, was Jung Balak, “Jangri Bulak” (Welfare records) or Ichungarra-billuk (*Northern Standard*, 24 March 1996, p.6), He died in Katherine on 5 July 1945. Frank Secretary died at Bagot Reserve in Darwin on 6 June 1953 (“Old native 'chief' dies”, *The Argus*, 8 June 1953, p.5. There is no known record of Frank supporting the 1951 strike).

²⁴ *Northern Standard*, Tuesday 24 June 1930, page 6.

²⁵ *Northern Standard* 24 March, 1936, cited in “Kenbi Land Claim Book”, Brandl, Haritos & Walsh, 1979, pages 269-270 and Mansfield J, 2006, pp. 94-95.

most of his people as Wards of the State, became the spokesperson for the Larrakia until such time that succession could pass to the young “Prince of Wales”. King Solomon's son and heir lived another eight years, and appeared content to leave leadership duties to Nadpur, as Fred Waters was known amongst his language group. On 8 June, 1953, *The Argus* reported on the passing of an “old native 'chief”:

“Frank who preferred the white man's way of life, gave up the leadership of the tribe to his brother more than 30 years ago. He became a printer's 'devil' and paper delivery boy on the 'Territory Times' which went out of existence 20 years ago. He was believed to have been more than 60 at the time of his death.”²⁶

European Name	Abo. Name	Tribe	Locality	Date Admitted
Jack Mulberry	Mangad	Wongaitj		
King George	Jingahulih	Larrakia		
Princewell	Mitbul			

Above: King George's name and “Tribe” recorded in NT Welfare records about 1944 followed by his 3-year-old son's name, recorded as “Princewell” AKA Mitbul.

Boy up to 15 years			
EUROPEAN	NATIVE	TRIBE	ADMITTED
BILLY	MEDI DJUNG GON		APRIL 28 th
BRUCE		WAGIDJ	" "
	JAKA-GUN-GUN	" "	" "
HAROLD	BURRA WODA	" "	" "
DAVID	WADJ-DJUN-BOOK	" "	" "
	HABLUK	" "	" "
BILLY	DJIN ISAT	BRINKEN	" "
PRINCE OF WALES	MIDT-PUL	LARRAKIA	" "
GABRIEL		" "	" "

Above: Prince of Wales' Larrakia name as recorded in NT Welfare records.

²⁶ *The Argus*, 8 June, 1953, page 5. “Old native 'chief' dies.”