

Senate Inquiry into Indigenous Workers Whose Paid Labour Was Controlled by Government.
Canberra, ACT

Dear Senators,

I have long been concerned about the issue of the “stolen wages”, and greatly appreciate the fact that your committee is enquiring into this matter. My submission concerns the Queensland experience.

As a young woman in 1966 I worked for a time at a hostel in Brisbane run by the OPAL (One People of Australia League) organisation, whose committee included the late Mrs Joyce Wilding and the late Senator Neville Bonner. It was an incident which occurred during that time which made me aware of the stolen wages matter.

I was employed as a driver – to take people where they needed to go, or to pick up people or supplies. One day I was asked to take an elderly couple, visiting Brisbane from the country, in to town as they needed to get some money out. They wanted to buy some things, but also to have spending money so they could go and see relatives and friends, and maybe give some small presents to the little ones.

I was under the impression that I was taking them to some kind of institution like a bank, where they would be able to withdraw their money. They were a very respectable couple, and dressed in their best clothes for the excursion. We went to the George Street office of the Department – I forget if it was still the Department of Native Affairs or had become the Department of Aboriginal and Islander Affairs – and up the stairs into the office. There, a young (white) male clerk asked them what they wanted, and when they requested money from their account he asked them what they wanted it for. I was confused by this – no bank teller had ever asked me that, and I was very young compared to them. Having no idea about what was happening, I was unable to intervene, and indeed would have felt it disrespectful to them to do so. In the end they were given no money at all, but coupons for an amount which would cover the cost of some clothes for themselves, and were to be spent at McDonald & East's shop down the road.

This was my introduction to the stolen wages issue, and I found it very embarrassing indeed. The problem had not been a lack of money in their account, but the authority of a government official – and a junior one at that, to exercise control over the money, and thus over the lives of these people, who had spent the majority of their lives working. One would have thought that in their old age, they would be able to enjoy the benefits of this labour.

I never forgot this incident, and when I heard about meetings in the Aboriginal community of Brisbane about stolen wages in the early 1990s, I became involved, and have been so ever since. Most of the people whose wages and savings were withheld/controlled have passed on now, and many of their families have been deprived of an inheritance they should have received, leading to a cycles of poverty spanning generations. Some of those affected are my age and younger, and I often reflect on the great differences there have been in our lives, and the often unrecognised efforts made by such people to achieve a mental peace and balance in their lives.

For the purposes of this enquiry, my submission is as follows:

1. I know of a number of Aboriginal people in Brisbane whose lives have been affected by the stolen wages issue, but who are uncomfortable with the idea of written submissions. Most of them would like the opportunity to speak to you themselves about their experiences and the effects on their lives.

I submit that, as part of the process of “setting the record straight”, people such as these need to have their stories heard, and the broader, non-Indigenous community needs to hear stories which illuminate the realities of Indigenous life in this country, and shed light on one of the causes of Indigenous poverty.

2. I have been collecting information on the issue for a number of years, and a list of the historical material I hold is attached. I have not photocopied and sent it all as I am reluctant to flood the committee with material which you may have already obtained from other sources. If you require any of these documents, I would be happy to make them available to you, as a number of them address the kind of financial arrangements and controls mentioned in your terms of reference.

Please contact me if you want any of this material forwarded to you.

I am sure that others with a more detailed knowledge of the defects afflicting the offer made by the Queensland government, as well as the process which has been followed, will spell these out for you. I know from personal experience with my friends the deep hurt the deep hurt and disappointment caused by this government's failure to deal adequately and honourably with this matter.

My best wishes to your committee in your endeavours to make this part of Australian history known, and more accessible to all Australians, and to bring some closure to those people whose lives, and whose families lives, have been damaged by this episode of our shared past.

Lin Morrow

28th July, 2006

Fairfield. Q 4103

LIST OF HISTORICAL DOCUMENTS

Historical background

1. Memorandum to all Protectors of Aborigines, and explanatory circular from the Chief Protector of Aborigines, 1933. These documents concern the creation of a centralised account in which wages are to be deposited.
2. Chapter 10 from Uncle Joe McGinness' book "Son of Alyandabu" (published 1991). Entitled "A History of Exploitation", this chapter relates incidents in the 1960s where the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander People (FCAATSI) was involved in protests against the government's control of wages and savings. It also discusses the exclusion of Indigenous servicemen from receiving repatriation benefits. Chapter 9 of this book exclusion of Indigenous people from Social Services benefits, including from benefits for people suffering from tuberculosis.
3. "The Economic Control of Aborigines under the present Queensland Act" (1965/67) by Frances Lovejoy. Written for FCAATSI, this paper details the principal restrictions of the acts, and summarises the effects of these. They are:
 - a) the control of property
 - b) the making of wills and the disbursement of estates of deceased and missing Aborigines and Islanders
 - c) the control of working conditions including
 - (i) the right to work for a particular employer at a particular job, to continue working at a particular job, and to leave the job;
 - (ii) encouraging others to leave their jobs;
 - (iii) the setting of minimum wages, including a slow workers' clause.
 - d) the control of payment of wages, including
 - (i) directing payment of wages by the employer to a trust fund rather than to an employee;
 - (ii) investing such wages without consultation with the employee.
4. FCAA Wages and Employment Committee reports of 1971-72 & 1972-73 by Dr Barry Christophers. These documents are mainly concerned with conditions in Queensland, but also have material on the Northern Territory. They refer to relevant sections from Acts and Regulations and schedules.
5. "The Department of Aboriginal and Island Affairs Trust Fund System of Queensland", a report by J. McGinness, president of FCAATSI, in 1971.
6. "Fallen among Thieves - Aboriginal Labour and State Control in Inter-war Queensland" by Raymond Evans and Joanne Scott. (Detailed and researched article)
7. "Aboriginal wages and trust funds in Queensland" by Dr Ros Kidd, FAIRA Occasional Paper No. 1.
8. "The exploitation of Aboriginal workers" by Annie Holden and "Policy doublespeak: The Aborigines Welfare Fund" by Coralie Kingston, FAIRA Occasional Papers Series 1, No 3.

More recent documents: reports, leaflets, statements

- 1. Final report: "Investigation of the Aborigines Welfare and the Aboriginal Accounts" (The Consultancy Bureau, 1991) commissioned by the Queensland State government.
- "Aborigines Welfare Fund and Savings Bank Accounts" - Discussion Paper, Dept. of Family Services & Aboriginal & Islander Affairs. 1990s
- Welfare Fund and Individual Accounts Campaign - letters to politicians and to supporters, notices of meetings and leaflets produced during the campaign. 1990s

- “Breach of Trust?” article by Dr Ros Kidd.
- Information from QAILSS (Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services Secretariat):
“Savings Accounts and Wages” project information sheet & application form, information sheet from QAILSS for the Elders’ Forum.
- Report on QAILSS consultations on behalf of the state government, August 2002; brief extract containing the responses to the government offer by people surveyed.
- Recommendations of “Women’s Business Workshop Group A”, Rockhampton

Personal stories

- Newspaper article: “Nellie Sheridan: the slavery of our black past” CM 26/5/88
- Newspaper article: “Poverty stricken slaves demand justice on wages” SM 26/6/88
- Newspaper article: “The mystery of champ Elley’s missing money” CM 3/8/91
- Newspaper article: “The case of the missing millions” CM 18/9/93
- Newspaper article: “Aboriginal fighter - worthy champion” CM 26/1/95
- Newspaper article: “Marie worked 7 years for 12 pounds” LRQ Jun/Jul 95
- Newspaper article: “The state stole this woman’s life” CM 4/11/95
- Newspaper article: “Wage slaves” CM 9/1/96
- Newspaper article: “Australia’s child slaves reopen files on a nation’s shame” CM 20/1/96

Recent campaign - the 1990s

A) Newspaper articles

- Newspaper article: “State owes blacks \$4m in back pay” CM 21/5/86
- Newspaper article: “Probe into ‘missing \$20m’ for Aborigines” CM 26/7/90
- Newspaper article: “Aborigines want public inquiry on ‘missing millions” CM 30/7/90
- Newspaper article: “Blacks refer welfare fund study to CJC” CM 16/12/91
- Newspaper article: “Welfare Fund claims delayed” LRQ Feb 95
- Newspaper article: “Welfare Fund victims still wait” LRQ Apr 95
- Newspaper article: “Blacks seek UN justice over funds” CM 28/10/95