

It's 55 years since the Wave Hill walk-off, and Aboriginal workers are still fighting for their stolen wages

NT Country Hour / By Max Rowley

Posted



Bill Harney, now 90, worked as a stockman for many years without pay. (ABC Rural: Max Rowley)

From an early age, Yidumduma Bill Harney toiled long, hard days on Northern Territory cattle stations with barely any time off — and he didn't get paid for his work.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander readers are advised that the following story contains images of people who have died.

"We worked from daylight till dark, seven days a week. Friday, Saturday, Sunday, all the way," Mr Harney said.

"There was no spell. We didn't know anything about

Key points:

- More than 770 claimants have so far joined the NT stolen wages class action
- Aboriginal workers' wages were

this spell. All we knew is just continue working."

The 90-year-old Wardaman elder grew up on Willeroo Station, 120 kilometres south-west of Katherine, where he was put to work at a young age in the stock camps of the Vestey family's pastoral company.

"They made money because we weren't getting paid. Aboriginal people never got paid," he said.

withheld and they endured "appalling" conditions

- Many never saw the benefit of equal wages, as families were turned off properties where they had worked for generations

"They did a lot of hard work — mustering cattle, women growing gardens, washing up dishes and ironing clothes."



Mr Harney's pay was "a bit of flour, tea, sugar ... dried-up corned beef". (*ABC Rural: Max Rowley*)

Mr Harney is one of more than 770 Aboriginal workers and their descendants who have so far joined a Northern Territory class action to recover stolen or unpaid wages.

They include former stockmen, farm hands, domestic workers and labourers.

It follows similar actions in Queensland and Western Australia, where [Aboriginal workers remember long hours and lonely work](#).

Hard work and rations

Mr Harney said he worked for rations, "a bit of flour, tea, sugar ... dried-up corned beef" and damper.

"Sometimes we got one blanket a year, and a swag cover. We used them through the winter," he said.

"And later on, when the stock camp was closed, we had to put those blankets and swags back to the shop and they gave us a mosquito net."

Former stockman Jacky Anzac also started work at a young age.

"Straight to the stock work, cattle work. Learning the horse first, and the next year start riding the horse for mustering," he said.



Jacky Anzac, 79, grew up on Pigeon Hole station in the Victoria River District. (ABC Rural: Max Rowley)

Mr Anzac remembers working long days without pay, droving cattle hundreds of kilometres to north-west Queensland.

"Droving cattle, droving bullock, walking days at a time, walking to Mount Isa," he recalled.

"Money been only go one side to white people. And us mob, black people, didn't get ours.

"Despite that hard work, we never got any money. Nothing. Only just bread and beef."

'Protection acts' ruled lives

Historian Charlie Ward interviewed some of the cattle industry figures from the time.

"They'd say, 'Well, of course, if they didn't like it they could just leave'. But it really wasn't that simple," he said.

"They were subject to a whole lot of social welfare acts and ordinances."

Until the 1970s, Indigenous Australians were governed under various "protection acts" which controlled every aspect of their lives — from personal relationships and contact with family, to whether they lived on reserves, worked or owned land.

It was these acts that allowed Aboriginal people's wages to be withheld in trust by state and territory governments.

"Wages weren't paid. People were given food in exchange for their work," Dr Ward said.

"On some stations there was clothing issued, and that was expected to be returned at the end of the season."



Dr Ward says companies benefited from the labour of Indigenous workers whose conditions were "absolutely appalling". (*Supplied: Australian News & Information Bureau*)

Dr Ward said conditions across the pastoral industry "weren't what they are today".

"With the Vestey company, non-Indigenous workers would have three years in between holidays," he said.

"There weren't any rec facilities, it was very primitive conditions. But for the Aboriginal workers, things were far worse.

"The non-Indigenous workers had built accommodation, they had shower facilities — very basic, but they did have facilities. Whereas Indigenous workers basically had to fend for themselves, get drinking water from the cattle trough.

"On Wave Hill, Indigenous people were overworked to the point where they couldn't take time to bury their dead at times."

Wave Hill walk-off 'woke us up'

Mr Harney said he didn't think about wages much at the time.

"We said we're not getting paid but we like our work, we like the job. You know, that's what we said. And they said money was for white man," he recalled.

Mr Harney said his mindset changed when 200 Gurindji stockmen, domestic workers and their families — led by Vincent Lingiari — walked off Wave Hill station in 1966, protesting against poor pay and conditions, [as well as massacres and other abuses by early colonists](#).



The Wave Hill walk-off, led by Vincent Lingiari, depicted in this mural in Katherine, sparked the Aboriginal land rights movement. (*ABC Rural: Max Rowley*)

"Lingiari was the one who woke us up, because he had the union behind him, an Aboriginal bloke called Dexter Daniels," Mr Harney said.

"We're very proud of them, what they did. We thank the both of them. Especially me. You know us poor Aborigines worked hard for nothing."

Even as some Indigenous workers started getting cash wages in the 1950s and 60s, Dr Ward said it was often only "about 15 to 20 per cent" of their non-Indigenous counterparts.

"The government was very slowly going through the motions of providing people with cash so they had some experience of the cash economy, but in a very contrived way," he said.

"And because people were isolated on stations, the only place they could spend money was usually at a store that was owned by their employer and they were notorious for charging outrageous prices."

Equal wages a hollow victory

When the government agreed to give Aboriginal pastoral workers equal pay from December 1968, for many it was a hollow victory.

Families and whole communities were turned off properties where they had worked for generations, as stations became more mechanised and Aboriginal workers were laid off.

Professor Thalia Anthony from the University of Technology Sydney said one of the reasons the government put for supporting equal wages was to "relocate Aboriginal people onto reserves" under a policy of assimilation.



Professor Thalia Anthony says Aboriginal people never received the benefit of equal wages. (*ABC Rural: Max Rowley*)

"After the cattle station era, except if they were granted Aboriginal land rights ... the opportunities became much less," she said.

"Because they had no money, because they'd been given no recognition, they were forced to live in communities with overcrowded housing and very basic access to education or health.

"They couldn't enter into a labour market, so they kind of became cut off from a lot of society ... and, to some extent, disconnected from their own culture.

"If they had had their wages paid, it would have given them more options.

"They wouldn't have had to relinquish to the mandate of government. They would have been more self-determining over their lives."

Unfinished business

Professor Anthony said other forms of reparations were needed in addition to the class action, "including proper truth telling around the working lives of Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory".

"There needs to be some kind of reckoning with how significant Aboriginal people have been to the economy, but also how oppressive the circumstances were as well," she said.



Bill Harney lives today at Menngen, 180 kilometres south-west of Katherine. (*ABC Rural: Max Rowley*)

Mr Harney hopes to recover some of his unpaid wages — if not for him, then for his family.

"We'd be happy to get some of that money back from when we worked for nothing in the early days," he

said.

"We might be a bit old, but we can put that money away, aside for the parents, for when we go."