

## **VINCENT LINGIARI MEMORIAL LECTURE**

**A BLAST FROM THE PAST**

brian manning

**An activists account of the Wave Hill walk-off**

There was an expectation amongst Aboriginal Workers that the 1965 application to vary the Cattle Industry Award by the North Australian Workers Union would at last grant them wage justice and remove laws which arbitrarily denied them equal value for equal work.

For a seven day week, working from sun-up to sun-down Aboriginal pastoral workers in the Northern Territory were paid around 3 pounds 6 shillings (\$7.00) when white workers were paid around 23 pounds (\$46). In addition Aboriginal workers were to be fed in accordance with a schedule in the Wards Employment Ordinance which provided for an adequate and varied nutritious diet.

Daily fare in the Wave Hill stock camps consisted of dry-salted beef, dry bread, tea and sugar.

Employer advocates asserted that most Aboriginal workers were merely hose-holders ; an inference that they were only capable of watering the vegetable garden on the station and therefore were not deserving of the same wage and conditions as non-Aboriginal workers.

Contrary to the argument expounded by many of the employers that Aborigines either couldn't handle money or alternatively had nothing to spend it on there was eager anticipation amongst Aboriginal Communities who would be able buy up on consumer goods: radios, record players , records, stockmen's outfits clothes and toys for their wives and kids and maybe even a second hand motorcar when the travelling hawkers came round.

In fact many station stores stocked consumer goods and operated credit accounts which dissipated what wage accumulation Aborigines might accrue. One instance which came to the attention of the Northern Territory Council for Aboriginal Rights (Rights Council) when twelve aboriginal families consisting of 35 men, women and children were brought in to the 13 mile at Berrimah to sit out the wet season revealed that most workers owed money to the employer after 6 months work when they purchased on credit, working clothes, blankets, swags, canned food and tobacco; items which should have been supplied.

They had no money to see them through the wet season. When presented with the situation, Welfares response was to tell them to go to Bagot Aboriginal Reserve where they would be fed and housed. However, they objected to living in Bagot for cultural reasons and wanted to stay at a camp they had set up at the 13 mile.

After considerable argument and threats to mount a publicity campaign, authority was given to obtain food supplies from the Bagot Reserve Stores.

Aborigines were arbitrarily bound to employers by a system of institutionalised poverty.

Needless to say, in March 1966 when Arbitration Commission President John Moore handed down the decision that Aborigines should be paid equal wages but not for almost 3 years (to allow pastoralists breathing space to prepare for the change) they were variously dismayed disappointed and downright angry.

Paddy Carroll, North Australian Workers Union (NAWU) Secretary had not anticipated the result. Although the union case was ill prepared, he expected the claim would be granted given the strong moral argument.

He gave a report on the surprise decision to a hastily convened meeting of the Northern Territory Council for Aboriginal Rights people held on the foreshores at Rapid Creek.

The Northern Territory Council for Aboriginal Rights had been formed in December 1961 as an Aboriginal pressure group with a majority membership of traditional Aboriginal People who at that time were wards of the State & Territory in addition to sympathetic non-Aboriginal supporters. The organisation became active supporting Aboriginal struggles for equality and actions against discrimination wherever it appeared.

The Council for Aboriginal Rights had pressed the North Australian Workers Union (NAWU) to act in the matter of equal wages for all Aboriginal workers. The Cattle Industry Award in which the N.A.W.U was a respondent covered the largest number of Aborigines experiencing gross exploitation.

Dexter Daniels, a Roper River man was the Rights Council nominee to the position of Aboriginal Organiser in the N.A.W.U. He was bitterly disappointed about the outcome and took the decision as a personal failure to deliver the goods. He had been building up the expectations of Aboriginal stockmen during his organising trips.

His brother, Davis Daniels, Secretary of the N.T.C.A.R was an orderly in the Aboriginal ward at the old Darwin Hospital on Myilly Point. He advised Dexter that Vincent Lingiari the Gurindji traditional owner and leader was in Darwin for medical treatment. This turned out to be most opportune. Dexter seized the opportunity to inform Vincent of the Arbitration Courts decision and discussed their options with him.

Dexter was in favour of widespread strike action in protest. However, Paddy Carroll the NAWU Secretary who had presented the Union case was not confident the Union could sustain a general strike of pastoral properties and instructed Dexter that he was not to initiate any strike action without his authority.

Paddy agreed to protest the decision by calling a strike at Newcastle Waters; a smaller property near Elliott south of Katherine on the Stuart highway. He was hopeful that the action could be confined to the one station which would be convenient and relatively easy to service with provisions and maintain contact.

On 1<sup>st</sup> May 1966 Newcastle Waters Stockmen went on strike. Quite ironic really as Roy Edwards' Newcastle Waters property was one of the better stations.

Dexter's wings had been clipped and he spent his time servicing the strikers at Newcastle Waters supplying them with stores from Elliott and travelling back and forth to Darwin to keep Paddy informed and relay progress back to the strikers.

When news of the Newcastle Waters strike hit the

southern press, Southern Trade Unions responded instinctively with financial support. Wages struggle was an issue with which Unionists easily identified. As finances rolled in pressure was brought to bear on Paddy Carroll by the Rights Council to extend the strike to the larger stations in order to achieve a more meaningful protest. The main exploiters of skilled Aboriginal labour were the large absentee landlord holdings ; Vestey's Wave Hill and Australian Estate's Victoria River Downs. At the time the two largest properties in the Northern Territory.

Paddy was unmoved. He was wrestling with a pastoralists' proposal for a slow worker clause; a proposition where pastoralists would only pay full wages to Aboriginal workers deemed competent by the management and reduced amounts to others commensurate with their level of skills to be determined by management.

The Rights Council did not agree with Paddy's assessment that the strike should be confined to a small "token" protest and determined 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 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 where steers from Wave Hill were fattened before movement to Morestone in Queensland for slaughter and export through Townsville.

At Wave Hill they found Vincent Lingiari waiting for news of a breakthrough which had not occurred as a result of the Newcastle Waters strike. Vincent was eager to take action, however all the stockmen were away at the annual Vestey's Negri picnic races near the West Australian border and no action could take place until their return. Nick wrote out a couple of telegrams for Vincent to send if and when the Gurindji decided to strike.

One telegram was addressed to Paddy Carroll, Secretary of the N.A.W.U advising him that they had gone on strike; the other was addressed to George Gibbs, the Public Officer of the N.T.C.A.R advising him also of the strike.

Telegrams were sent to both parties because there was a concern that the Union might not acknowledge the strike.

The Council had learned that a strike by the Gurindji some years earlier around 1953, had gone unheeded and the strikers had been starved back to work when no support was forthcoming. The union said they had not been advised of the strike. Not surprising since the Union did not have an organiser in the field at that time.

At VRD Dexter spoke with traditional owner and leader, "King Brumby" he too was prepared to join the strike. He was given telegrams to both Paddy Carroll and George Gibbs advising them of the strike action. However it was learned some weeks later that when he presented the telegrams to the postmaster at VRD, the messages were torn up and not sent.

When George Gibbs the Public Officer received his message he knew that the Union would also have received a telegram. He went to Paddy Carroll with Phillip Roberts, another Roper River Man and President of the Aboriginal Rights Council insisting that immediate support be given to the strikers despite Carroll's reluctance to widen the action.

Paddy Carroll was not happy with the prospect of widening the strike. He felt control was slipping out of his hands. However he agreed that someone should take a trip to Wave Hill with supplies and report back to the union on the situation there.

George Gibbs and Paddy Carroll were not on good terms and Paddy would not agree that George should go, nor would he endorse Nick who was one of his outspoken critics.

However, at that time I was between jobs, waiting to pick up a casual job on the Darwin Waterfront and I had a small truck. Paddy and I had a reasonable working relationship so he agreed that I should go with Dexter , the official Union Organiser.

A Tiwi Man, Robert Tudawali, a former football great and out of work Aboriginal film star from Chauvel's film "Jedda" and a television series "Whiplash" was a member of the Council for Aboriginal Rights. He had been elected Vice President at a recent meeting and wanted to become involved in the struggle. He joined the trip with Kerry Gibbs the 14 year old student son of George and Moira Gibbs who had instilled in Kerry a

respect for Aboriginal Culture and an interest in the movement for Aboriginal Rights which the Gibbs' had inherited. Moira was now assistant Secretary and George was Public Officer of the NTCAR.

As soon as Paddy gave the go ahead we moved to purchase stores and fuel enough for the return trip. Three 44gallon drums of fuel took up half the load capacity of my 30cwt Bedford truck. We set out early the following morning and managed to get south of the Willeroo turnoff where we camped for the night. The road from willaroo to Wave Hill was in the process of being rebuilt with a major upgrade under the Federal Government's National Beef Road development scheme. It was a horror stretch consisting of a series of temporary, heavily corrugated diversions which could not be driven at great speed with my overloaded small truck. We crawled along most of the way between 15 and 20 m.p.h. Fortunately I had fitted new ten ply tyres before setting out. Travel on the surface being constructed was not permitted so we did not reach the strikers camp in the dry bed of the Victoria River until 9.30 that night.

I will never forget the reaction to our arrival. There were nervous cries of 'cudeba' 'cudeba' the Gurindji term for white fellas. White ringers from the station had been cruising the area hoping to entice some of the women from the camp. In the tense atmosphere of the strike camp this was in fact harassment. As I turned onto the riverbed and drove slowly towards the camp the people realised it was not a ringer's vehicle. An excited young Aboriginal lad climbed up onto the running board and called out that it was Dexter Daniels.



The nervous cries changed to loud and excited cheers from a swelling crowd around the truck. I could actually sense their relief in the realisation that they were no longer on their own as they had been on a prior occasion and the promise of support was now a reality.

That was when I first met Vincent Lingiari.

Vincent was a quietly spoken, dignified man who spoke with the confidence of a leader.

“Its good to see you. We been waiting for you fellas”

We shook hands and I asked him how they were and whether they had food. He said ‘we alright. Might get some tea and sugar tonight and unload in the morning.’

I too was relieved to finally arrive. I had been driving on my nerves and I was exhausted having wrestled with the appalling conditions for the last 16 hours.

After unloading a few supplies to meet their immediate needs. I unrolled my swag alongside the truck at a respectable distance from the nearest Strikers campsite and listened to Vincent’s account of their walk off as we drank a welcome mug of tea. He had confronted the Wave Hill manager, Tom Fisher and asked for full wages for the stockmen. When Tom Fisher refused, Vincent told him they were walking off. Vincent went down to the Aboriginals camp and called the people together.

He told them that proper wages had been refused so he had said they were walking off. There was no dissention. The stockmen agreed they should walk off.

The people collected their belongings and quietly walked away from Wave Hill Station to the dry bed of the

Victoria River near the Police Station and Welfare settlement about ten miles away.

This event has become part of Gurindji folk lore and is annually celebrated and re-enacted as 'Freedom Day'

Vincent went to see the resident Welfare Officer, Bill Jeffrey and told him of their decision. He handed Bill Jeffrey the telegrams and asked him to send them.

As we talked a utility with a couple of ringers aboard drove slowly down the low level crossing and stopped for a couple of minutes. Vincent said 'them ringers looking for Aboriginal women.'  
They didn't approach but drove off .

Everyone I spoke to had stories to tell of hardship, abuse, lack of respect and loss of dignity. Obviously the issue of wages was just the last straw. If they had been treated with more respect and consideration they might not have gone on strike.

Some of their complaints should have been rectified by Welfare Patrol Officers' diligence in policing the Welfare and Wards Employment Ordinances. I asked them if they had complained to Welfare Patrol Officers about abuse and food supply. I was told that Welfare Patrol Officers spent most of their visits with the manager of Wave Hill Station and didn't come to the Aboriginal camp to ask about their living and working conditions without the Manager. Consequently they could not talk freely to these officers in the presence of the Manager. In other words, they were gagged.

I turned in well after midnight.

You can't sleep in after daybreak. The flies get you up early. After a quick breakfast we got the strikers together and Dexter Daniels gave them a talk promising that we were going to continue supporting them, and that we were going to call on people around Australia to help. He told them how the Unions down south were already sending messages of support and donations to the Union in Darwin after the Newcastle Waters strike and they were sure to continue their support for the Gurindji. I took the opportunity to take a few pictures which I passed on to the press after I got back to Darwin to ensure good media coverage.

We then asked Vincent where he wanted to put the stores. He said we will take some off now and share around and the rest we take up to Bill Jeffrey at the Welfare Office.

I was surprised that he elected to store the stuff at the Welfare Office. My experiences with Welfare due to my activities in the Northern Territory Council for Aboriginal Rights were negative. Welfare control over Aborigines was absolute, enshrined in draconian legislation which became a model for South African Apartheid.

However, Vincent had confidence in Bill Jeffrey, the Resident Welfare Officer who apparently helped to sustain the people until we arrived.

I drove up to the Welfare Office with Dexter and Vincent. Bill Jeffrey came out to meet us. He was eager to meet 'that terrible Dexter Daniels'. He was privately elated at the turn of events and expressed great admiration for Dexter and the leadership role he was playing. He directed us to an engine room where we unloaded the provisions.

Bill Jeffrey asked me where I had camped last night. I told him I had camped in the bed of the river with the Gurindji. He said 'You had better bring your swag up here and camp in the works accommodation.' I was aware that there was an Ordinance in force which prohibited camping within a half a mile of an Aboriginal camping area and assumed that he had advised me to move camp with this in mind.

I discussed with Bill Jeffrey the need to organise regular meat supplies. He thought this might be arranged from Hooker Creek Aboriginal Reserve south of Wave Hill. He said he was driving down there the next day. I asked if I could go with him to organise on-going meat supply. He agreed saying that he would be leaving early.

Vincent and Dexter had discussions about other Gurindji who were working on nearby VRD outstations; Mt Samford and Pigeon Hole. They had been thwarted in their intentions to walk off through their telegrams not being sent but more likely through intimidation by the Manager.

Since I planned going to Hooker Creek with Bill Jeffrey it was decided Dexter, Vincent and Robert Tudawali

would take the Bedford truck next morning. They took off before daylight and I waited for Bill Jeffrey. He came over to the works accommodation to tell me I could NOT go with him to Hooker Creek as I did not have a permit to enter an Aboriginal Reserve I was not impressed as I could have gone with Dexter and Vincent if I had known this was to happen.

I occupied myself writing a couple of articles for *Tribune* the CPA weekly newspaper retelling some of the stories I had been told of abuse and hardship experienced by Aborigines working on Wave Hill Station, the jewel of Lord Vestey's empire.

Before lunch a vehicle pulled up driven by Wave Hill station manager, Tom Fisher with Ted Evans a Darwin based Welfare Department Executive Officer and his charter pilot, Ossie Osgood. I walked out from the accommodation to greet them. Ted Evans, surprised to see me, asking abruptly, 'What are you doing here?' I told him I had brought a load of supplies from Darwin on behalf of the North Australian Workers Union for the Gurindji Strikers and the welfare officer had invited me to camp in the works accommodation. He was visibly displeased but made no comment.

Around 4 o'clock in the afternoon Bluey Harvey, the local police officer drove up and asked me if I was Brian Manning. I said 'yes, that's me'. He then ordered me off the property saying he had received a radio message from the welfare officer to tell me to leave.

I was flabbergasted. I told him I had been invited by the Welfare Officer to camp there and until such time as Bill Jeffrey told me to go, I was staying put unless he wanted to forcibly remove me. He drove off without a word.

It was dark when Bill Jeffrey arrived back. I came to help him unload some beef into his coolroom. He exploded! Are you still here? I told the copper to tell you to go. Hell, you should have been more astute than to tell Evans I gave you permission to camp here. You will have to go.

That sounded more like the Welfare Department I was accustomed to and had grown to mistrust!!

I assumed he had the authority to permit me to camp there in the circumstances and I knew of other people who had stayed there. I thought the episode quite strange.

I just rolled my swag and went back down to the river bed to catch up with Dexter, Vincent and Robert Tudawali who had returned with a truck load of Gurindji people from Pigeon Hole and Mt Samford. The truck was loaded to capacity with Gurindji Workers and their families.

I asked Vincent if all the workers had walked off Wave Hill. He said yes, every one walked off....except the Pumpers (these were maintenance workers who camped out at water bore sites where windmills and diesel motors continuously pumped water into troughs for the cattle). I suggested that they should walk off too.

Vincent hastened to assure me that they wouldn't call out the pumpers because they had to look after the cattle.

Here was another insight into this quiet, unassuming and responsible leader who understood his priorities .

Lupnagiari, known as “Captain Major” was a Gurindji employed on Newcastle Waters. He was a skilled stockman who had worked around a number of stations and participated on many cattle drives. He had injured one eye as a young man chasing a breakaway steer on horseback through scrub country, an injury for which he was never compensated.

Indeed I later became aware that Aboriginal workers had been specifically excluded from the provisions of the Workers Compensation Act of the day . Incidence of serious and disabling injury were and still are quite high amongst Aborigines in the pastoral industry.

Another such case was Mick Rangiari also known as ‘Hoppy Mick’. As a lad he was working for the local policeman. While riding over to Wave Hill to pick up mail, he was thrown from his horse startled by a snake as he was leaning down to open a gate. He lay injured with a broken pelvis for a couple of days until he was found by an Aboriginal man who happened to be walking that way. He was taken to Wave Hill Station where he lay on the verandah for a couple of weeks until examined by the visiting Flying Doctor Fenton and flown to Katherine. By then it was too late to do anything as his pelvis had already set crooked. He is now permanently disabled but continues a vocal stalwart of the struggle.

The next morning we got the strikers together again to discuss where we were to go from here. I raised a couple of issues which I felt were important.

There were health and education issues to be addressed

There was a need to arrange a local supply of beef. I had not been able to arrange this from Hooker Creek but Bill Jeffrey had told me they needed stockmen there.

I suggested that some of the men could work there as stockmen and perhaps eventually run their own Station on the Hooker Creek Reserve.

This suggestion was not well received. They explained that Hooker Creek (now Lajamanu) was not Gurindji Country. It was Wailpri Country.

We then headed back to Darwin, the truck, with no load shuddering over the corrugations handling the rough road no better . With another dozen or so trips before some of the new road was opened up, the timber tray on the truck literally shook to pieces.

Back in Darwin, Dexter and I reported the situation to Paddy Carroll, the Secretary of the NAWU, confirming that the people were resolute and intending to stay on strike until a satisfactory result was reached. They would need ongoing supplies which we could continue to ferry down. 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.



We reported to the Rights Council also and it was obvious that action was required to raise the profile of the strike which was now receiving expanding 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.

Looking ahead, the Rights Council was planning to send a couple of spokesmen south to campaign amongst Trade Unions and community support groups for broader support and more financial aid.

Robert Tudawali was well known around Australia through his film and television acting and he seemed a good choice as envoy. Besides, as a well known actor, Actor's Equity was prepared to finance his trip to Sydney and Melbourne. With Dexter Daniels they would prove to be an excellent team.

A day or so after our return a concerted effort was launched by Welfare Officers and top Management from Vestey's Organisation to get the people back to work. Paddy Carroll was present and Frank Hardy had managed to go along with him as a press observer. Welfare Department had enlisted the aid of Jacob Roberts a Roper River Man to talk to the people. Jacob had been a founding president of the Rights Council but resigned during the first executive meeting. His brother Phillip Roberts was elected in his place.

Frank described to me how the parties tried to convince the strikers to return to the station. They presented a confusing exercise trying to explain how they would be earning more money in the change over to decimal currency. Can you believe that ?

Jacob earned himself a reputation from the Gurindji as a 'snake' trying to portray Tom Fisher as a 'good man' and how things were going to change for the better now at Wave Hill. The Aborigines were amused that Tom Fisher kept rubbing his head. It seems he had a habit when he was annoyed of taking his hat off and rubbing his bald head.

Vincent made it clear. They were not going back to the station. They experienced a feeling of pride and regained dignity. There was more to this than just increased wages. Over the ensuing months as I talked to various strikers and understood their indignation and anger I was told quite emphatically. 'We never go back to vestey'.

In early October 1966 I commenced work on the Darwin Wharf and a few months later was elected to the Union executive. I now had less spare time on my hands but the truck continued to supply the Gurindji with volunteers from the wharfies, co-ordinated by George Gibbs, the Public Officer of the Rights Council who was also a seasoned wharfie.

The onset of the wet season was imminent. This meant the Gurindji had to move from the bed of the Victoria river. They shifted camp to an area near the Welfare Office and Police Station where they erected some

temporary shelters and sat out the wet season . This was a difficult period for them.

Boredom for the young men who would rather be working and uncertainty as to what the future held for the Gurindji. Welfare maintained an ongoing contact for health and education purposes but their continued attempts to convince the Gurindji to go back to work for Vestey's was not welcome. The Gurindji were adamant. They were not going back to work under the appalling conditions at Wave Hill.

Some Gurindji families travelled to Katherine and Darwin during this time taking the opportunity to do some socialising whilst at the same time taking pressure off the strikers' camp.

Meanwhile the Gurindji decision not to return to work at Wave Hill Station meant it was necessary to broaden support. To achieve this the Rights Council decided to implement plans to send a couple of people to Sydney and Melbourne.

We had anticipated that this might be necessary and set about making arrangements. Frank Hardy was active in Sydney gaining publicity and organising press conferences.

We had initially intended to send Robert Tudawali and Dexter but a positive tuberculosis test ruled out Tudawali who was quarantined in the Darwin Hospital T.B. Ward.

Lupnagiari (Captain Major) who had initially walked off Newcastle Waters was asked if he would go with

Dexter and how he felt about speaking to meetings telling people about the life of Aboriginal stockmen in the Northern Territory.

Captain Major was articulate around his friends and he knew what working as an Aboriginal stockman was all about. He had never spoken to meetings of non-Aboriginal strangers though so we had a few dummy runs to give him an idea of what he would be in for.

There was no doubting his resolve and determination. He was the leader of the Newcastle Waters Stockmen and had gone down to Helen Springs with George Gibbs and Clancy Roberts to pick up some more Vestey stockmen who wanted to join the strike.

There were about eight Aborigines there who said they were 'waiting for Dexter' to come and pick them up. They went back to the homestead to collect their families and belongings then on to join the people at Newcastle Waters.

On arrival at Newcastle Waters they found that a child's mother had been left behind so they did another trip back to pick her up. She was in the camp and said she wanted to go to Newcastle Waters and put her things on the truck.

As they were leaving the manager arrived brandishing a rifle and ordered them off the property. The woman was very frightened but without argument they left and returned to Newcastle Waters. There had been numerous reports of Pastoralists threatening to shoot any 'trouble makers' stirring up the stockmen to strike. The facts were that Aboriginal stockmen already knew about the

Newcastle Waters Strike and were 'waiting for Dexter' to join in the struggle despite intimidation from their employers.

At Newcastle Waters Lupgnagiari told the strikers he was going to Darwin and then on to Sydney and Melbourne with Dexter to tell people about the strike and ask for their help.

Actors Equity were disappointed that Tudawali could not go, however Hal Alexander, their Secretary put to his executive that they still finance the trip with Lupgnagiari taking Robert Tudawali's place despite his not being a member of Actors' Equity.

In Darwin I took Dexter and Lupgnagiari to a men's outfitters and rigged them out with some clothes for the trip: Lupgnagiari with stockmen's gear and Dexter with town clothes. Frank was to meet them in Sydney and expose them to the media, trade union and community meetings.

Frank Hardy was at the airport to meet them. Hal Alexander had organised a press conference. Journalists were eager to get first hand news of the strike from Aboriginal participants instead of recycled press reports.

That night I rang Frank to ask how they went. He said Lupgnagiari was a bit nervous but soon responded when asked questions. His simplicity, sincerity and sense of humour impressed the journalists who did not give him a hard time.

Although one journalist was sceptical about the much publicised report that food rations in stock camps consisted of only dry-salt meat, dry bread, tea and sugar.

He said ‘Captain Major, surely you got more tucker than just salt meat, dry bread, tea & sugar’

With a slight, thoughtful pause. Lupgnagiari replied:

‘Well yes, I reckon maybe sometimes they might put some more salt on the salt beef’. Frank said there was a few seconds of complete silence whilst they all digested what he had said and realised he had cracked a joke ! There was applause and much laughter as they realised here was a man with a sense of humour. This reaction served to put Lupgnagiari more at ease.

Dexter spoke slowly but confidently and made it clear that Aboriginal stockmen in the Northern Territory were prepared to extend the strike and he wanted to ask people to continue giving them support.

Frank considered they had made a very good impression and would be introduced to the Union rank and file meetings over the next few days. It was proposed they stop over in Canberra on the way to Melbourne and speak with Aboriginal Affairs Minister, Barnes and meet Labor Party leader, Arthur Calwell and Gordon Bryant the ALP shadow Minister for Aboriginal Affairs.

They both were kept busy speaking wherever the opportunity arose. Gurindji support groups around the

country were being formed with people who had a commitment to the issue of Aboriginal rights.

The involvement of the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders (FCAATSI) broadened the support to include the wider community. Stan Davey, then General Secretary of FCAATSI arrived in Sydney to help co-ordinate the tour.

The Waterside Workers Federation (Sydney Branch) hosted Lupgnagiari on a trip to Brisbane and Townsville while Dexter continued to address job meetings in Sydney before their return to Darwin after about 4 or five weeks of what proved to be a very successful speaking tour. This was mainly because people in the Southern States were hearing about the strike first hand.

On his return Lupgnagiari went back to Newcastle Waters.

The Union had arranged for the people to receive their supplies from the Elliott store. This was a cost saving move which in fact meant less contact with the strikers. The men from Helen Springs had moved on to Banka Banka Station where they had family. Other clan groups decided to move to their own traditional areas during the wet season when they usually stopped work until next mustering season. A couple of men had been enticed back to work with the promise of more money. The Newcastle Waters Strike had run its course.

Lupgnagiari and wife Amy moved to Darwin for the remainder of the wet season.

Early one morning in March 1967 the Gurindji decided to move from the camp near the Welfare Officer's

residence and go to Wattie Creek to set up a permanent settlement of their own, where they would not be under the scrutiny of Welfare and Police.

A petition was composed and sent to the Governor General, Lord Casey, requesting the grant of 500 square miles for their own use. This site is now known as Daguragu .

The Gurindji were going to run their own station on their own land. If Vestey's did not agree they would fence the land anyway.

They immediately set about establishing a permanent campsite with the building of bush shelters. Subsequent trips by the Rights Council provided a brick making machine of their own and supplied more substantial building and roofing materials. Their efforts to plant trees and grow vegetables was encouraged and supported with a small pump set up to pump water from nearby Wattie Creek although the introduction of a few goats to provide milk and meat did not help with the development of the garden.

Everyone in the camp was busy establishing their permanent presence making shelters, building a toilet, hunting for food, fetching timber for posts and fuel for fires - squatters on their own land.

Peter Gilgi was the camp baker. He made bread for the whole community using bidouri ovens in a trench where he had made a fire then shovelled out the coals, placed the ovens in the trench then covered them with the coals.



After the bread was turned out onto a makeshift table Peter summoned the people for their share by loud clanging on a wheel rim with a tyre lever.

In 1967, a year after the strike commenced, NAWU Secretary, Paddy Carroll asked if I would do a trip with Dexter around some of the stations to check if pastoralists were paying full wages to experienced stockmen.

We travelled west from Katherine through Timber Creek to Auvergne and Bullo River Stations down the Duncan Highway to Rosewood, Mistake Creek, Nicholson and Ord River Stations then back through Inverway, Wave Hill and VRD Station.

None of the properties we visited were paying Aboriginal stockmen full wages. Faced with the prospects some said they would use white stockmen or engage contractors who would choose and employ their own labour.

The manager at VRD was quite unco-operative and openly hostile towards us because Dexter and Vincent had collected Gurindji from his out stations, Pigeon Hole and Mount Samford.

Brumby, the traditional owner of VRD wearing an engraved silver plate on a chain around his neck proclaiming him “King Brumby” of V.R.D was standing nearby. He said to me ‘This all my country’ with a sweeping gesture of his hand. The manager scoffed derisively and said ‘The silly old bugger reckons he owns all this country.’

I asked the manager where we could camp for the night. He wouldn't hear of us camping nearby and directed us to the bed of the Humbert River about 20 miles away from the station. He did not want us to talk to his stockmen. He didn't realise that in the short time he and I were talking, Dexter had found out all we wanted to know from King Brumby and the few Aborigines still at the homestead.

There was considerable uncertainty as to what the reaction of Vestey's would be to the Gurindji decision. A Vestey's manager had told Vincent that he did not approve of them erecting fencing on Wave Hill land. Vincent maintained this was his ancestors' land and did not belong to Vestey. They just owned the cattle.

The Governor General, Lord Casey replied to the Gurindji petition declining the request for a land grant. Their minds were made up though; they continued with their plans to live at Dagaragu. They were not moving from Gurindji land.

Pincher, A Gurindji Man, was an avid rock collector and had samples he had collected over some time but not identified. Bill Jeffrey organised miners' rights and Frank Hardy painted a sign at his request naming the Wattie Creek camp as 'Gurindji Mining Lease and Cattle Station'.

With the aid of a young geologist volunteering his expertise, the Gurindji covered an area defined on an exploration map, picking up rock samples and bringing them back for his inspection and identification.

Each man had a specific area and on return pointed on the map to the place where he had picked up each rock. We were optimistic that there might be a worthwhile discovery which could provide justification for a mining lease. Unfortunately surface indications were not encouraging with the exception of some semi precious stones such as agate.

The squalid state of Aboriginal living conditions on pastoral properties was highlighted by the Walk-off. Vestey's had bulldozed the Aboriginal camp within days of the Gurindji walking off to avoid national press focus on housing which could only be described as dog kennels or humpies.

The Government was embarrassed by the disclosure and six members of the Northern Territory Legislative Council who visited in 1967 to see the situation for themselves. The issue of decent accommodation for Aborigines in the area could not be ignored any longer.

W.C.Wentworth, Federal Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, visited Daguragu in April 1968 and gave the impression that he was in favour of granting the Gurindji land. However, Vestey's were opposed to it. Vestey's had a more effective lobby in Cabinet with Peter Nixon. The Government rejected Wentworth's proposal a few months later.

Instead, plans were revealed to construct houses for Aboriginal families. Of course there was no consultation with the Gurindji as to the siting of these dwellings

which were built on the area known as the ‘drovers common’ a treeless, barren, dusty tract of land which was not part of the Wave Hill Pastoral Lease and which was subject to flooding. The area is now known as Kalkaringi.

Some Gurindji worked on the building sites making bricks with a small brick making machine however they refused to live in the houses which were eventually occupied by Wailpri people and other outsiders. The Gurindji wanted houses built on an area of their choice which had cultural significance a few miles away on Wattie Creek. However the Housing Commission refused on the grounds that they could not get title to the area which was part of the pastoral lease.

Lupgnagiari was a Gurindji. He and Amy, an Aboriginal woman from Boorooloola whom Lupgnagiari wanted to marry, decided to go to Wattie Creek and join Vincent. A marriage between the couple was a ‘wrong skin’ union in Aboriginal Lore and not permitted by custom. However, the couple were beyond child bearing age and Vincent eventually agreed that they could marry and live at Wattie Creek. Vincent wanted Lupgnagiari to be his head stockman when they started their own station.

Southern union support extended to donating a Toyota Dyna truck and building materials while many supporters visited Wattie Creek to assess for themselves the needs of the people and discover areas where they could offer further support.

With the Gurindji decision that they were not going to return to Wave Hill the Rights Council moved to assist them apply for unemployment benefits and other family welfare entitlements. Our biggest obstacle was the difficulty in establishing applicants' ages. Departmental assessments invariably rejected claims for age pension to many who were in our opinion well qualified.

There was concern in areas of government at the prospect of losing the skilled workforce which had walked off Wave Hill. The Gurindji were asked to attend a meeting of some four or five members of a Sessional Committee of the Legislative Council. They asked me to go along with them.

With Pincher, Mick Rangiari, Long Johnny, and Donald I attended the meeting in the Legislative Council building. The proposition raised by the members was for the Gurindji to take over the stock work at Beswick Station.

I thought it was a reasonable proposal which appeared to be a genuine attempt by Legislative Council Members to resolve the impasse. However, I waited to see what the Aborigines had to say about it.

Pincher spoke out without hesitation. "No that not our country Wave Hill our country. We can't take that nother fellow's country. We stay our country."

There was no more to be said. It was a good try but the Gurindji had already told me they were not interested in going to Hooker Creek. Now they were not interested in going to Beswick or anywhere other than their own land.

The Gurindji dilemma was that there was no Aboriginal Reserve land on Gurindji country. It had all been leased to pastoralists. They had no choice other than to take some land back from Vestey's: their original proposal.

Cecil Holmes a well known film maker came with me to Wattie Creek and shot some 16mm film for southern T.V showing the Gurindji erecting fencing in the act of claiming their land back.

The resulting publicity raised the level of activity with demonstrations around Australia and also in London demanding Vestey's relinquish land to the Gurindji people.

I was elected by the Darwin wharfies to attend the Waterside Workers Federation's All Ports Conference in Sydney as a fraternal delegate.

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. The money was expended on wire and pickets through the Rights Council making purchases as required on behalf of the W.W.F.

Vincent had been approached by managers from Montejinni and Camfield stations, both privately owned, to supply stockmen at full wages. He decided to let some of the young stockmen go. They were skilled stockmen and enjoyed the life.

He was going to continue with plans to build at Wattie Creek and take back some of their own land. The Gurindji who were working away on other properties would come back to Wattie Creek on the off season for holidays and to visit family. He said a contractor had also come to employ some stockmen for contract mustering.

With the employment of some young stockmen on neighboring properties, the strike was beginning to run its course, others wanted to return to employment. Unbeknown to Vincent, some men went back to work on Wave Hill Station. They were mostly Wailpri men with their women who were apparently employed by a contract musterer.

Vincent was adamant that the Gurindji would never go back to work for Vestey's and continued to maintain his determination that they would continue to live on Wattie Creek at Dagaragu.

In October 1968, the Northern Territory Administration increased the wages of all their Aboriginal employees to coincide with the introduction of full wages in the

pastoral industry. This represented a victory for the Union and effectively ended the wage campaign.

By 1970 the Gurindji struggle had advanced beyond a claim for equal wages it had now developed to a claim for their ancestral land. All government efforts to dissuade them from this course of action were fruitless.

Over the next couple of years they continued to consolidate their occupational presence with the building of a store where provisions supplied by the Rights Council and from other donations were kept; the building of more substantial housing with the assistance of visitors from Southern Unions and an ongoing refusal to move into Housing Commission dwellings constructed on the 'Drovers Common'.

Long term plans included:

The establishment of a herd of cattle and horses under their own brand.

The establishment of their own school; Billy Bunter was to be their own school teacher.

A water bore with water supply in every house;

An ablutions block including proper washing facilities;

An electricity supply;

Some more vehicles and a workshop in which to service them plus training in vehicle maintenance.



Bandy had his own 3 ton Bedford which he was quite capable of maintaining although the Rights Council had arranged for a Darwin mechanic, Norm Philpot, to do a major engine overhaul and recondition

In March 1971, the Gurindji formed the 'Murramalla Gurindji Company' as a further action to press their claim.

In January 1972 The McMahon Government was considering the purchase of an area of land as a reserve and Vestey's were offering to surrender some of the pastoral lease but there was strong resistance from members of McMahon's cabinet representing pastoral and mining interests. As a result of government intransigence the Aboriginal Embassy was established on the lawns in front of the National Parliament in support of Land Rights.

The December 1972 election saw the Whitlam Government elected on a policy supporting Aboriginal Land Rights. Gordon Bryant was appointed Minister for Aboriginal Affairs and was a strong supporter of Aboriginal Land Rights in perpetuity including mineral rights.

Early in 1973 the Whitlam Government established the Aboriginal Land Rights Commission and appointed Justice Woodward as Chairman. He had represented the Yirrkala Aborigines in 1970.

The Terms of reference required him to enquire into ‘arrangements for vesting title to land in the Northern Territory’ ....including rights to minerals and timber.’

The July 1973 ALP Conference amended ALP policy in this regard and watered down the policy statement replacing ‘mineral rights’ with receiving royalties from mining on Aboriginal land.

In a cabinet reshuffle in October 1973 Gordon Bryant was replaced as Minister for Aboriginal Affairs by Senator Jim Cavanagh

Justice Woodward visited North America late in 1973 seeking information as to how the Canadians had addressed American Indian Land Rights.

His 1974 report excluded mineral rights from Aboriginal lands on the basis ‘that the land should be subject to all laws normally applying to freehold land.’

And he recommended that:

‘ minerals and petroleum on Aboriginal lands should remain the property of the Crown.’ This would have effectively removed Aboriginal Land Rights from the Federal election of the 18<sup>th</sup> May 1974.

With the election out of the way Prime Minister Gough Whitlam presented the Gurindji with leasehold title at Dagaragu in August 1975 nine years after the walkoff. The occasion was almost an anti-climax but nevertheless a time for celebration and a media fest. The heroes of the strike such as Lupnagiari took it all in their stride.

The issue of leasehold title enabled the improvement of Gurindji housing and facilities and saw the beginnings of Vincent's vision of the Gurindji running their own station. In 1977 Vincent came to Darwin on one of his rare trips to receive recognition for his special contribution to the Australian Aboriginal people's struggle for justice and rights in the award of the Order of Australia.

My visits to Dagaragu became less frequent although I maintained an ongoing interest with occasional trips when I could manage a seat on a visiting politician's flight or share a road trip over a now tarred beef road.

Clyde Holding, Minister for Aboriginal Affairs in the Hawke Government presented Freehold title in 1985 (?) on the occasion of another re-enactment of the walk-off.

In August 1986, Kerry Gibbs and I decided to resurrect the Bedford truck which had been off the road for 6 or 7 years and take it down for old times sake.

I was disappointed to see helicopters mustering cattle and to learn the Gurindji were paid \$50 a head compensation for stock destroyed in the T.B. & Brucellosis eradication campaign when there were serious doubts they were infected.

The enterprise was being run by accountants from Katherine and an appointed white manager who did not appear to consult with the Aborigines and was not

implementing a training programme to teach the young men stock working skills.

I talked with Vincent about the possibility of creating employment for women and non-stock workers with a value adding proposal to use their turn off to make a sun-dried meat product and export it to Asia instead of live cattle export.

We had come prepared with enough seasoning spices and vinegar to make a marinade and conduct a trial. Vincent was interested in the proposal so he sent off a couple of men to get a killer and we prepared about 100 kilos which we strung up on a makeshift “clothesline” of barbed wire.

After 3 days the product was suitably dried. I took a control sample back to Darwin which I found quite edible 6 months later. I asked the Gurindji to harvest the remainder after 2 more days. I learned later from Victor that the product was considered very good. They ate it all.

I ran the proposal past someone in the Aboriginal Benefits Trust Fund but they were not enthusiastic. It would have to operate as a joint venture.

Vincent looked quite frail during that visit and sadly about 18months later in January 1988 ALP Senator Bob Collins offered me a seat in his charter flight to be present at Vincents Funeral. During the flight I reflected on the stages of the struggle. From what had started as a fight for equal wages had grown into a National Movement for return of stolen Lands and a reassertion of

Aboriginal Nationhood. This old Man in his quiet,gentle but firm stand could teach us all a lesson in solidarity. He had become a National Aboriginal Leader.

I made a brief impromptu speech which did not do him justice some words of admiration for his strength of commitment and passed on a message of condolence from Frank Hardy. It was an honour to have known him and be considered a friend.

My old friend Vincent Lingiari, Gurindji Leader had become a legend

“Freedom Day” as the walk-off anniversary has become known are occasions when I revisit where possible. The last one in August 2000 saw the occasion celebrated with the unveiling of ten fabric banner size panels sewn by the Gurindji women with the guidance of Joanna Barkmann depicting the historic event.

There were two unveilings, one on the banks of the victoria river above the camp site and another at the N.T. University. I was invited to speak at the first one where I noted that Dexter Daniels had passed away in Katherine on Xmas Day 1999 without recognition of his special contribution to the Gurindji struggle.

I also expressed my disappointment that the Gurindji cattle venture was not thriving except for a small killer herd. The Gurindji lands are now being leased.

Vincent’s vision of the Gurindji running their own station served to satisfy the aspirations of his contemporaries many of whom have now passed away.

But his legacy is still there in the freehold Gurindji country. It is in the hands of the Gurindji People to decide what they will do in their own time.

When the time comes it is incumbent on the nation to assist their economic advancement and social development as a significant gesture in the spirit of reconciliation. That will be a most appropriate way of saying 'Sorry'.

The 6<sup>th</sup> Vincent Lingiari Memorial Lecture  
Delivered Friday 23<sup>rd</sup> August 2002 at the Northern  
Territory University, Mal Nairn Auditorium.