

Our History, Our future.
**Address by ACTU Indigenous Officer Kara Keys
To the ACTU Executive and Indigenous Leadership Conference
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My name is Kara Keys, I am a decedent of the Yiman and Gangulu peoples of Central Qld. I work at the ACTU as the National Indigenous Officer.

I'd like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we meet the mighty Larrakia Nation and pay my respects to the elders of this nation, past & present.

I acknowledge all of my Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander sisters and brothers in the room, our Conference Elder Jo Willmot and extend a warm welcome to our Maori cousins and pay my respects to their delegation Kuia (Elder) Georgina Kerr.

I'd also like to pay my respect to all of you – the leadership of the Australian trade union movement – who are committed to protecting and advancing the rights of all Australian workers.

One of the great things about being Australian is that the story of our country is truly remarkable.

We think of our nation today as a product of many layers – layers of traditions and cultures and institutions, like unions, that make us who we are.

And the founding layer – the bedrock and the thing that is most unique about Australia among the nations of the world – is the long story of our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage.

This story stretches back through tens of thousands of years and hundreds of generations.

A history that is an impressive story of daring and courage, ingenuity, of resilience and resourcefulness.

This story is one of cultures that have not only managed to outlive many other ancient civilisations – the ancient Greeks and Romans – but also pre-dated them by thousands of years.

This story is one of people who have lived and survived in this land through the last ice age on this continent. Our presence here stretches back to a time when mega fauna roamed the land.

This is a story of the longest unbroken thread of human culture on the planet.

This layer of our nation's story is not often recounted, until recently wasn't taught in the Australian school's curriculum and hasn't generally been seen as an integral part of our nation's history and identity.

Another layer of our story, the layer of the trade union movement and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' fight for wage justice and civil rights is also not a history that many people know. But this history – our story - is so important and relevant to the work we do today as trade unionists.

And today, we are here on the lands of the Larrakia, and in the honourable presence of the descendants of Vincent Lingiari, to celebrate a significant part of that story: the story of the Wave Hill Walk Off.

We have heard parts of this story already this morning. We heard from Ged and the Gurindji delegation here today.

And like any good story, there is a moral: lessons that have been learned along the way. Indeed this story is an epic saga, one where the outcomes have rippled through generations and see us – Aboriginal and Torres Straits Islander union members and the leadership of the trade union movement - sitting here today.

We are not just here today, in the sense that we gather to celebrate this epic saga. We are here because the Wave Hill Walk Off triggered a great evolution. An evolution in the industrial rights for Indigenous workers, and an evolution in the union movement. We are here because of the legacy of the women and men who both fought and supported this dispute.

I have learnt a number of hard lessons in researching this dispute. And in all honesty, it is from the tougher elements of this story, the uncomfortable truths, where I draw the conclusion of the great legacy that has been left to us.

In light of the environment at the time, a key reason for the NAWU to pursue a claim through the Arbitration Commission for the inclusion of Aboriginal stockmen in the Cattle Industry Award, was because the union felt that having a cheap Aboriginal labour force would undermine the wages, conditions and jobs of white workers.

At the October 1964 NAWU Central Council two significant things happened:

1. The union made a historic decision to appoint an Aboriginal organiser;
2. The union still saw Aboriginal workers as a threat. In a resolution named, “The Aboriginal Question” the union argued:

“The existence of a large non union force lends itself to a general depression of living standards for all and in the event of industrial conflict could conceivably place non union aborigines in the position of becoming potential scabs.”

The union at the time was also experiencing extreme pressure from the Aboriginal run and lead Northern Territory Council for Aboriginal Rights, whose key platform was equal wages for Aboriginal workers.

There was great tension between the union and NTCAR. At the time the union refused NTCAR affiliation - citing paternalistically, “We believe in assimilation but not isolation” and that Aboriginal workers would be best served by joining the union and the Labor Party. Even though, on the wages they were earning, they couldn’t afford the full union rate and the NAWU refused to introduce a concession rate for those workers. Basically locking them out of union membership.

And these tensions had a direct impact on the Wave Hill strike. Dexter Daniels, who was an organiser for the NAWU was on leave at the time of the Wave Hill Strike, largely because he was intensely feeling the pressure of the tension between the union and the NTCAR - of which he was a member and his brother Davis Daniels was the Secretary. He felt pulled in opposite directions and decided to take a break. But still, on his own time, organising Aboriginal workers.

Perhaps, if Dexter was working for the union at the time, things would have turned out differently. Why? Because the NAWU Secretary expressly instructed Dexter and other supporters not to take the Wave Hill workers out on strike. And the union could not support them.

These may be some uncomfortable truths. It may not sound very much like a great legacy. But it is.

It is a great legacy because, once the Gurindji walked off Wave Hill, the NAWU gave them their 100% support.

It is a great legacy because the union movement nationwide galvanised around the workers and gave them great support.

It is a great legacy because it fundamentally shifted the NAWU and other unions in the country. It showed unions that Indigenous workers were willing to fight for wage equality and it shifted unions to the role of supporting and fighting for all workers.

And it is a great legacy because while the trigger for the Wave Hill Walk Off was equal wages, the gun powder was the systemic racism, poor living conditions, a legislative environment which allowed for the theft of children from their families and the theft of Aboriginal people having any agency over their own lives.

The Wave Hill Walk Off shifted the nation.

And For the Gurindji it was about their right to be Gurindji. And how wonderful it is to be joined here by the direct descendants of Vincent Lingiari who still live and thrive as Gurindji on their ancestral lands.

So here we are, the direct beneficiaries of that legacy. I can stand here and proudly say that I am a descendant of the Yiman and Gangulu peoples and I am a proud Aboriginal unionist. And every single union leader and Indigenous worker in this room can proudly inherit what has been won in this dispute.

Here we stand on the shoulders of those giants. We give them our Respect. We Honour their courage and determination in the face of adversity. And we resolve to continue to stand in Solidarity.

Given the occasion, and the unique opportunity that is present to us here, a full meeting of the ACTU Executive and Indigenous Unionists, surely our question becomes: what will our legacy be?

We, who are the next generation in this epic saga: what chapters will we write?

Are we ready to evolve to the face our modern challenges and stand shoulder to shoulder with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers and their communities?

We should not be under any illusions: these challenges are great. Our communities are in crisis.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, workers and organisations are facing some of the worst attacks to community, civil and industrial rights in a generation.

Youth suicide has increased dramatically – they are at crisis levels. Health, education, employment and mortality outcomes for Indigenous Australians have in some cases worsened.

There is a broad systemic failure in our justice system recently evidenced by the circumstances which have led to the formation of the NT Royal Commission into Youth Detention.

The incarceration rates of Indigenous peoples and in particular youth are at their highest in decades, largely orchestrated by regressive legislation which criminalises Indigenous people for everyday behaviour. Meanwhile, those who are there to care have been under resourced to a level we have not seen in decades.

Here in the NT under the paperless arrest system an elderly Aboriginal artist of great esteem, who was simply gathering with others under a tree, died in custody. And he is one of too many Indigenous people who come into contact with the justice system for minor matters and end up dying in a prison cell.

While the federally mandated maximum wage that oppressed the workers at Wave Hill is gone, the Community Development Program remains. A program which indentures remote

Indigenous workers into forced labour, offers no wage, no federal OHS and Workers' compensation protection, no superannuation and no conditions of employment.

As Pat Dodson so succinctly said, back in 1999 at the Vincent Lingiari Memorial Lecture:

“Be warned, there is a serious move afoot in this country, by very powerful forces at the highest level of Government, business and society to return the position of Indigenous Australians to the situation that existed in Australia before the Wave Hill strike in 1966.”

Pat warned us, “the hard men of Vestey's still walk the corridors of power.”

Given the approach to remote Indigenous workers under the CDP and the fact that the broader crisis in our communities is being overseen by a Federal Indigenous Affairs Minister who is either incompetent or complicit, it is clear that the hard men of Vestey's have just been re-elected for another term of government.

Comrades, these are great challenges we face. As Ged said in her speech, we must fight on every front. But do not be overwhelmed.

The Gurindji and the unions that supported them stood in the face of even greater challenges, they stood together and they won.

And so too will we.

As the descendants and beneficiaries of that great legacy, together we will stand on the shoulders of our union and community giants.

Together we will stand, together we will fight, and together we will win.

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