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## **Our mixed history.**

This is the edited summary of a speech given by Gwynnyth Evans on behalf of Trade Unionists for Wik at the weekend in solidarity with the Yorta Yorta people, at Barmah on Sunday 21 March 1999.

The fight of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders for land and the development of working class struggles in Australia have both parallel and interrelated histories. Both struggles have international and national aspects. Indeed the international context has been very important in providing the impetus for some of the more positive elements of the trade union movement's support for the indigenous struggle.

The land rights struggle in Australia predates the formation of unions in this country. The struggle for land rights began in 1788 and continued wherever contact was being made. We have to remember just how recent these wars were, there were still massacres of Aborigines in the 1940s.

Unions were formed very early in Australia's colonised history, in the 1800s. Some were formed on the ships coming to Australia. By the 1850s there were unions like the Printers and Lithographers, the Stonemasons, the Carpenters, and the forerunner of the AMWU, the Society of Engineers. These unions were very strongly based in the trades. As Aborigines were not recognised as trades men or crafts men they were usually not incorporated in the early unions.

By the 1890s the very large Australia wide rural unions were formed, the Shearers, which became the AWU, and the Amalgamated Workers Union. Despite the fact that the pastoral industry was largely based on black labour, there were few attempts by unions to have any orientation towards Aborigines at all.

By the time the union movement was starting to become strong, in the 1890s, the various colonies of Australia considered that they had resolved the struggle for land rights, they had won the land wars. At this time the various colonies set up the various Aborigines Protection Acts. These Acts gave the colonies, and later the states, the right to control the wages of Aborigines, the rights of Aborigines to work, and to control their bank accounts among other things.

These laws isolated Aborigines from organised labour, just as mission stations were isolating Aborigines physically. Unions were growing and expanding but it was mainly the white workers who were being organised. Some policies of the trade union movement were detrimental to Aborigines. The most infamous of these is the union movement's push for the White Australia Policy.

The unions were trying to address the issue of indentured labour in the cane industry,

whereby cane barons sent raiding parties to nearby Pacific Islands to kidnap people for work in the cane fields. The White Australia Policy was adopted by the newly federated nation state in 1901.

In 1926 the union movement in Australia established the ACTU as a national voice. The Aboriginal community was also organising for rights for Aboriginal workers. By the early 1930s the Aboriginal Progressive Association was formed in NSW to fight for citizenship rights and for indigenous people's wages.

The White Australia Policy, whilst not being directed at indigenous workers, had a profound effect on them. In 1938 the Aboriginal Progressive Association wrote to the ACTU saying "The ALP and Trade Unions have given us no real help or support in our attempts to raise ourselves to citizen level. Why do they not raise their voices on our behalf? Their White Australia Policy has helped to create a senseless prejudice against us, making us social outcasts in the lands of our ancestors".

Just as the trade union movement was formed as part of an international workers' movement, it continued to be influenced by the international workers' struggles. In the early 20th century there were major developments in the workers' struggle, most significantly the Russian revolution. One of the positions that was taken by the leadership of the Russian revolution was support for the right for the self-determination of oppressed nations. That policy was adopted by the Third International, and it informed the actions of the Communist Party of Australia.

In the period when there was a growth in the influence of the Communist Party in trade unions, these issues were taken strongly up by the union movement. By the 1930s and 40s a range of unions were actively supporting many struggles of Aboriginal people.

Unions such as the Seamen and Waterside Workers and those in the metal manufacturing and building industries supported strikes by Aboriginal workers and rent strikes on mission stations and reserves, such as the actions by the people here at Cummeragunja in the late 1930s and in the 1940s on Palm Island, one of the most notorious reserves which was established as a penal reserve.

In 1946 the Pilbara workers struck for award wages and conditions and for land rights. They were supported by the Western Australian unions and many national unions. That strike went on for three years.

The support took various forms such as levies to support the striking workers, workplaces adopting workers. These common methods of workers' solidarity were used to support the black workers in struggles which went far beyond the fight for normal union conditions.

In 1950 and '51 there was also shopfloor support and delegate support for Darwin Aborigines who struck for citizenship rights and for award wages. Historically the rights

of indigenous people as workers and as citizens were often raised together. And importantly unions supported both.

But as late as the 1950s, Awards still did not apply automatically to Aboriginal labour in any State in Australia.

In the early 1960s the Wave Hill workers at Lord Vestey's properties walked off mainly over wages and conditions. But that struggle very quickly turned into a land rights struggle, because Vestey's eventually gave in on the wages and conditions. They even built new housing for the people which involved relocation. But the Gurindji were not going to be moved from Wattie Creek. And the struggle for Wattie Creek became the renewal of the struggle for land rights that had gone on throughout the 19th century, but had some degree of a hiatus in the early twentieth century.

The union movement was instrumental in supporting the struggle of the Gurindji. Actors Equity organised speaking tours throughout Australia, to all the Trades and Labour Councils, to many workplaces. Worksites adopted the struggle and pledged weekly levies to support the Gurindji. There was action taken against Vestey's by the Seamen's Union and the Waterside Workers Federation. The land claim was eventually won by the Gurindji in 1975. The first formal recognition of Land Rights arose out of industrial struggles.

It has to be recognised that the trade union support for Aboriginal struggles has not arisen as a philanthropic move on the part of unions. It came as a result of demands that were being placed by the Aboriginal community on trade unions.

Even in this, there have been some negatives. One example was in the late 1960s when Aborigines at last won the right to award wages, however, unions accepted "slow workers" provisions which could be used, and were, as an alternative method of discrimination.

By the time of the 1967 referendum the black community was much more nationally organised. The struggle for the referendum was about giving the Commonwealth powers to override the states to implement laws regarding Aborigines. This was seen as a way forward by the black community largely because it was a lot easier to fight one government than it was to fight all the different state governments.

Just as the trade union movement is part of the international workers' struggle, Aboriginal organisations were also internationalist. They were influenced by both the international struggles for black liberation and by the struggles of indigenous peoples.

The formation of National Tribal Councils in the late 1960s was based on connections that were made between the indigenous nations in America, particularly the Sioux, and Australian Aborigines.

In the early 1970s the influence of the international struggles for Black liberation were

seen in the formation of the Australian Black Panther Party, which had a strong orientation towards the working class.

In 1972 the Tent Embassy was established as a result of a struggle for land. The Yirrkala had taken a Land Rights case which was decided in 1971. The judge said that the land did not belong to the Aborigines, the Aborigines belonged to the land. The embassy was a response to a Prime Ministerial statement on the Yirrkala case that the government would never accept Aboriginal Land Rights. If the Australian government would never recognise Land Rights, then Aborigines needed an Embassy to represent them to this foreign government.

The union movement gave instant support to the establishment of the Embassy, with the trade union movement being instrumental in helping to transport Aborigines and Islanders to support the establishment of the Embassy. For example within a day of the Embassy's establishment, the Queensland trade unions were providing buses to transport people to Canberra. Unions also helped to defend the embassy itself.

The Aboriginal Tent Embassy which was established in 1972 is still being maintained in 1999. We may well need to defend it again in the near future, given that the Howard government is threatening to remove the Aboriginal embassy, because they say it's an embarrassment and an eyesore.

There have been many other important struggles for land when trade union support has been a crucial element including Noonkenbah where the union movement supported indigenous struggles to prevent mining on sacred sites.

There have been other areas where trade unions have been very mixed in their support. As stated there were Protection Acts established in all States in the 1890s. These were abolished at different times. The last of them, the Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Acts were only abolished in the late 1980s.

Certainly for the twenty years before they were abolished the Black Community had a strong orientation towards getting trade unions to support the abolition of those Acts. Many unions were strongly supportive and there was a tent embassy set up in Brisbane which was defended by trade unionists as well as the black community.

But at the same time when, in the early 1970s, workers on Palm Island tried to get union coverage so that they could fight for award wages with limited support from unions. Unions eventually took up that struggle, and there was a case a couple of years ago in the Human Rights Commission which said that the government owed back pay to Palm Island workers covering decades.

It is also interesting that in '73 and '74 when there were proposals from some unionised black workers to set up black workers rank and file organisations that crossed different

union boundaries, there was resistance from the organised union movement. The formation of a cross union, rank and file group such as Trade Unionists for Wik, with the support of the Victorian Trades Hall Council shows that the union movement has changed since the early 1970s.

So the trade union history of support for indigenous struggle is both a sorry one and a very proud one. One of the reasons for a group such as TUFW is to try to make sure that our unions can't continue bad practices of the past, and that we can build on the good practices that we have had.

By taking issues into our workplaces and ensuring our unions actually adopt struggles we can make sure we don't repeat the negative parts of our history.

We need to make sure that racism is tackled and support for indigenous struggle is taken back into workplaces. One way to do this is to get more unions to include articles about Aboriginal struggles in their union journals. Unions should be publicising issues such as the recent decision of the United Nations that the Australian Native Title legislation is in breach of the racial discrimination conventions.

I would also suggest that we need to go further than defense against the watering down of native title, and make sure that our unions are actively supporting Land Rights. If we look at 1998 there were two rallies that were sponsored by the trade union movement, one of them in March and one in August, with the union movement raising the demand for land rights there.

We should also remember that unions, in turn, have received support from Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders. The workers at Weipa who were fighting CRA for the right to organise received very strong support from the Aboriginal community. Those of us who were at the docks during the MUA dispute will not forget a line from a speech by the Aboriginal activist, Richard Frankland, that there are two things that his mother taught him to remember: Always respect your land, and never cross a picket line.

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