

Stolen Wages Update 8

February 2006

Queensland elders say the fight will go on...

A series of meetings hosted by ANTaR Qld at the request of elders in communities from Woorabinda to Normanton has indicated loudly and clearly that the fight for stolen wages is far from over as far as they are concerned.

Groups of up to 20 or more elders in each location have told ANTaR members the deadline for the Queensland Government's Indigenous Wages & Savings Reparations offer was irrelevant to them because the offer was discriminatory. They have asked their supporters to continue to campaign for wage justice.

In May 2002 the State Government made a capped offer of \$55.4 million to Aboriginal and Islander people whose wages and savings were withheld by previous governments in Queensland. Individuals who were affected by these practices and alive after 9 May 2002 have been offered a final payment of \$2000 or \$4000 according to age.

The offer closed at the end of January but as of the 23rd of that month only 8654 claims had been lodged and of those 7837 assessed. The Government had initially expected 16-20,000 applications.

According to Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Policy Minister John Mickel only 67 per cent of the claims assessed were eligible for a reparation payment.

Mr Mickel said unspent funds - so far only \$17.276 million out of the \$55.4 million has been paid out - would be used to "benefit Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Queenslanders".

"Once the claims are finalised, a decision will be made by Cabinet," he said. A number of groups, including senior Aboriginal people from the Fitzroy Basin catchment area around Rockhampton, said they had never had the opportunity to speak to decision-makers about their concerns with the offer and have



Normanton elders meeting with SWWG member Lillian Willis in January 2006

subsequently invited members of Cabinet and local MPs to meet with them on the issue as a matter of urgency.

President of the Fitzroy Basin Elders Committee Margaret Lawton said they were sick of the Government making decisions for them.

"I don't think the government's got the right to tell us what we can or can't get and the time limit on that money," she said.

Normanton elder Fred Edwards, who featured on the Stolen Wages postcard campaign, said they "worked like slaves" for the cattle industry across the Gulf of Carpentaria.

"They wouldn't be here if

it wasn't for us and now the government expects us to just take this lousy offer lying down or something, just like we had to take the rations back then," he said.

Groups in Rockhampton, Woorabinda, Yarrabah, Brisbane, Mareeba and Normanton have asked ANTaR Qld and all the campaign's supporters not to give up the fight, especially in procedural areas of concern such as what will happen to unspent funds and an open and accountable appeals process for the 33 per cent of applicants who had been knocked back. Mr Edwards, who accepted the offer because he felt he was forced to do so, said people who had been knocked back by the government in Normanton had not appealed the decision by the department because the only avenue of appeal was to call the department.

"Why would anyone call the people who turned them down to ask them again for something they didn't think was fair in the first place?" he said.

Mrs Lawton said it didn't matter which way they went because "we're the losers with or without that money".

"We're not letting it rest there, we're going to keep on fighting," she said.



Fitzroy Basin Elders Committee, NTEU & ANTaR Qld members meeting at Woorabinda in January 2006



SWWG members Russell & Yvonne Butler meeting with Yarrabah elders in January 2006

Churches back claims for stolen wages

Uniting and Catholic church groups have made strong statements in support of the aspirations of stolen wages claimants in Queensland.

In December, to support the National Day of Action called on in June last year, the Uniting Church National Assembly and the Uniting Aboriginal & Islander Christian Congress called on the Queensland Government to extend the deadline for Stolen Wage claimants or risk a public backlash.

Uniting Church President, Reverend Dr. Dean Drayton and the National Administrator of the Uniting Church Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress (UAICC) the Reverend Shayne Blackman said they supported the moves by The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission and Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation to oppose the reparations offer deadline.

"Stolen wages is a serious issue close to the hearts of many Indigenous people and it requires further time and more avenues to be worked through by all Indigenous stakeholders if a satisfactory outcome for all parties is to be achieved," Rev Blackman said. Late in January the Australian Catholic Social Justice Council (ACSJC) released a petition and Background Paper on the non-payment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers during the 20th Century (both available at <http://www.socialjustice.catholic.org.au> or for hardcopies contact ANTaR Qld as per below).

ACSJC Chairman Bishop Christopher Saunders urged all Australians to acknowledge the contribution of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers. □

"Over many generations people from a range of cultural backgrounds have helped to build the nation," he said.

"Sadly the contribution of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers is yet to be fully acknowledged."

He said there had been some movement by governments to recognise the wages that were not paid and to address the issue. □

"But much more remains to be done in order to meet the demands of justice", he said.

Townsville's Sea of Hands for National Day of Action!

(Photographs by Christine Howes & used with permission from the ABC Message Stick website - full story & more pics at <http://www.abc.net.au/message/blackarts/culture/s1546535.htm>)



Pictured

Top Left: the Hand Planting team

Top Right: 4K1G broadcaster Velma Gara & Organiser Florence Onus

Above Left: Stolen Wages Claimant Yvonne Butler speaks to media

Above Right: Organising & unpacking

Right: Cowboys star Matt Bowen (centre) with Townsville-Thuringowa

Community Justice Group workers Gavin Thomas, Mario Grauner & Rupia Tom



WHO TO CONTACT FOR MORE INFORMATION:

Keep up to date with developments and find out what you can do from the following people and organisations:

The Queensland Council of Unions: (07) 3846 2468: <http://www.qcu.asn.au>

ANTaR Qld: (07) 3844 9800 <http://www.antar.qld.org.au> Contact: office@antarqld.org.au

Australia Asia Worker Links: <http://www.aawl.org.au> Contact: aawl@aawl.org.au

For email information and contacts for the Stolen Wages Working Group and its executive, contact Christine Howes on 0419 656 277 or to join the Stolen Wages Update list email chowes@hotmail.net.au

Background Information: Dr Ros Kidd: <http://www.linksdisk.com/roskidd>