

# 'We only want our rights and freedom'<sup>1</sup>

## The Pilbara pastoral workers strike, 1946–1949

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On 1 May 1946 Aboriginal workers on Pilbara sheep and cattle stations staged a 'sit-down' strike for better wages and conditions. Over the following months people began moving away from stations to form two new independent communities. Why did the 'sit-down' strike become a walk-off? This article examines the conditions of Aboriginal labour in the Pilbara in the years leading up to the strike to develop an understanding of how labour conditions influence the form of industrial action available to workers. It also examines the extent to which the establishment of independent communities was a means of achieving better labour conditions on stations, and the extent to which autonomy itself became the strikers' goal.

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In 1946 several hundred Aboriginal people in Western Australia's Pilbara region left sheep and cattle stations and established self-supporting communities near the towns of Marble Bar and Port Hedland. Historical accounts of these events identify two distinct objectives of the action taken. On the one hand was the clearly articulated demand for higher wages and improved conditions on stations to which strikers intended to return; on the other was the goal of permanently leaving stations to establish independent communities. Some historians have stressed the relative importance of one of these objectives over the other. Heather Goodall, for example, notes the wide interest the strike has attracted as working-class industrial action but suggests that the strikers' 'demands for land and independence were less often noticed'.<sup>2</sup> Michael Hess claims on the other hand that the fortunes of the self-supporting communities have tended to overshadow the significance of the strike as action for improved wages and conditions, which he describes as 'a most significant event in Australian labour history'.<sup>3</sup> Others simply note the

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<sup>1</sup> Strike leader Tommy Sampie to Department of Native Affairs, incomplete letter, State Records Office of Western Australia (SROWA), cons 993 series 2030 1948/0732/86–7.

<sup>2</sup> Heather Goodall, *Invasion to Embassy: Land in Aboriginal Politics in New South Wales 1770–1972* (St Leonards: Allen and Unwin, 1996), 325.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Hess, 'Black and Red: The Pilbara Pastoral Workers' Strike, 1946', *Aboriginal History* 18, no. 1 (1994): 68.

existence of both economic and non-economic objectives. Writing from the perspective of the early 1970s, Peter Biskup saw the strikers' non-economic demands as a fight 'for human dignity, for an aboriginal version of assimilation'.<sup>4</sup> Lloyd Davies, meanwhile, has referred to 'the dream of setting up Aboriginal co-operatives to live off the land and manage their own affairs' as a continuing objective when the strike ended.<sup>5</sup>

This article builds on these accounts through a close examination of archival and oral history sources to provide a clearer understanding of the Pilbara strike, particularly in terms of its dual objectives. While Hess and Davies have discussed legislative restrictions on the freedom of Aboriginal labour in Western Australia, I begin by examining labour conditions at the level of employer-employee relations on Pilbara stations before the strike. Understanding the nature of labour relations not only helps to explain what motivated the strike, but also provides insights into the impact of labour conditions on the form of action that Aboriginal people took.

Significant studies of the nature of Aboriginal station labour include Ann McGrath's work on Aboriginal cattle workers in the north of the Northern Territory and eastern Kimberley, and Dawn May's research into the history of Aboriginal labour on Queensland cattle stations.<sup>6</sup> While McGrath emphasises the degree of cooperation and accommodation involved in Aboriginal relationships with stations, other scholars identify the degree to which Aboriginal station labour was unfree. Raymond Evans draws parallels with slavery, for example, while Claire Williams describes Aboriginal station labour as 'a variant or derivation of slavery' which she calls 'colonised labour'.<sup>7</sup> Thalia Anthony likens pastoral labour relationships to feudalism rather than slavery. She argues that feudal principles served both as 'a legal device to enable Crown ownership of land

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<sup>4</sup> Peter Biskup, *Not Slaves, Not Citizens: The Aboriginal Problem in Western Australia 1898-1954* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1973), 221.

<sup>5</sup> Lloyd Davies, 'Protecting Natives?: The Law and the 1946 Aboriginal Pastoral Workers' Strike', *Papers in Labour History* 1 (1988): 41; see also G. C. Bolton, 'Black and White after 1897', in *A New History of Western Australia*, ed. C. T. Stannage (Nedlands: University of Western Australia Press, 1981), 152.

<sup>6</sup> Ann McGrath, *Born in the Cattle: Aborigines in Cattle Country* (Sydney, London and Boston: Allen and Unwin, 1987); Dawn May, *Aboriginal Labour and the Cattle Industry: Queensland from White Settlement to the Present* (Cambridge, New York and Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

<sup>7</sup> Raymond Evans, 'Kings in Brass Crescents: Defining Aboriginal Labour Patterns in Colonial Queensland', in *Indentured Labour in the British Empire 1834-1920*, ed. Kay Saunders (London and Canberra: Croom Helm, 1984); Claire Williams with Bill Thorpe, *Beyond Industrial Sociology: The Work of Men and Women* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1992), 96; Ann Curthoys and Clive Moore, 'Working for the White People: An Historiographic Essay on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Labour', *Labour History* 69 (1995): 4.

and a means of exploiting the predominant Aboriginal population and their land attachment'.<sup>8</sup> While not attempting to classify Pilbara station labour in such terms, this article builds on the work of these scholars by drawing on and drawing into the discussion Tim Rowse's analysis of the role of rationing in the colonisation of Central Australia, as well as more recent work on rationing by Amanda Nettelbeck and Robert Foster.<sup>9</sup> Analysis of the relationship between conditions of Aboriginal labour and Aboriginal action in response to these conditions not only furthers our understanding of the wide range of Aboriginal responses to colonisation, but also provides an insight into the relationship between forms of labour, both free and unfree, and the means available to workers to address their concerns.

Minoru Hokari's research into the objectives of the Gurindji people when they staged a walk-off from Wave Hill Station in the Northern Territory two decades after the Pilbara strike serves as an important reference point for this article. Hokari argues that action taken by Gurindji people was never principally a strike, but rather that their purpose was 'to physically leave European authority' in order 'to regain autonomy and sovereignty over their country, to establish their own community, and to run the cattle station by and for themselves'.<sup>10</sup> His research raises the question of whether the Pilbara strike should be understood in these terms.

Pilbara Aboriginal people who took part in the strike included the Ngarla, Nyamal, and Kariyarra (Ngarluma) traditional owners of the Port Hedland and Marble Bar area, as well Nyangumarta, Mangarla, Warnman, and Western Desert speakers who had migrated into the pastoral area from the desert region to the east and north. As Nyangumarta has become established as a lingua franca, people in the Pilbara refer to themselves as *marrngu*, the Nyangumarta word for person, and I use this term in this article. I use the term 'pastoralists' to refer to both station owners and managers.

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<sup>8</sup> Thalia Anthony, 'Labour Relations on Northern Cattle Stations: Feudal Exploitation and Accommodation', *The Drawing Board: An Australian Review of Public Affairs* 4, no. 2 (2004): 121; see also 'Criminal Justice and Transgression on Northern Australian Cattle Stations' in *Transgressions: Critical Australian Indigenous Histories*, Aboriginal History Monograph 16, ed. Ingereth Mcfarlane and Mark Hannah (Canberra: Australian National University E Press, 2007), 35–61.

<sup>9</sup> Tim Rowse *White Flour, White Power: From Rations to Citizenship in Central Australia*, (Cambridge, New York and Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Amanda Nettelbeck and Robert Foster, 'Food and Governance on the Frontiers of Colonial Australia and Canada's North West Territories', *Aboriginal History* 36 (2012): 21–41.

<sup>10</sup> Minoru Hokari, 'From Wattie Creek to Wattie Creek: An Oral Historical Approach to the Gurindji Walk-off', *Aboriginal History* 24 (2000): 113.

## Colonial governance through rationing

The relationship between Aboriginal people and pastoralists in the Pilbara was part of a system of governance that had developed throughout Australia, based on the issuing of rations. In the early decades of the twentieth century, rationing was a key component of Aboriginal policy, implemented in the wake of colonial violence as an alternative to conflict over land use and the killing of stock by Aboriginal people. As Tim Rowse writes, 'rations "purchased" acquiescence to a new, imposed social order'.<sup>11</sup> Comparing rationing practices in the frontier regions of Australia and north-west Canada, Amanda Nettelbeck and Robert Foster argue that rationing was 'an effective means of Aboriginal pacification, surveillance, and reward' which became an institutionalised tool of governance on the Australian frontier.<sup>12</sup> Undertaken initially 'as an instrument of command'<sup>13</sup> by police officers, government officials and on church missions, rationing became outsourced to station management in Western Australia's pastoral areas by the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>14</sup> Such an arrangement suited government as a cheap and effective way to maintain control over large Aboriginal populations in the north, freeing taxpayers from the cost of rations and the burden of establishing government institutions and subsidising church missions.

Rationing also served the interests of pastoralists by settling the Aboriginal owners of country taken up by pastoral leases in 'native camps' located close to station homesteads. In this way, pastoralists restricted Aboriginal people's use of the land. Pilbara pastoralist Edward Holthouse made this explicit when he described labour relationships on Pilbara stations as 'emerging from the days of slave trading to one of control of nomadic natives who otherwise would be wandering at large on these large pastoral properties'.<sup>15</sup> Rationing by stations effectively kept the Aboriginal population away from towns and other centres of settler population, as Nettelbeck and Foster argue, while at the same time concentrating people in camps located close to station homesteads, and away from wells, waterholes and stock.<sup>16</sup>

Distributing rations on stations further served the interests of pastoralists by creating a pool of resident Aboriginal labour. That pastoralists

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<sup>11</sup> Rowse, *White Flour*, 20.

<sup>12</sup> Nettelbeck and Foster, 'Food and Governance', 27.

<sup>13</sup> Rowse, *White Flour*, 44.

<sup>14</sup> Nettelbeck and Foster, 'Food and Governance', 30.

<sup>15</sup> Edward Holthouse, *One Life's Journey* (Carlisle: Hesperian Press, 1987), 20.

<sup>16</sup> Nettelbeck and Foster, 'Food and Governance', 36.

should require labour from the recipients of rations was perfectly consistent with the practices of Aboriginal governance under protection policies. Rowse notes the tension between a belief in the positive effects of rationing for conciliation, pacification and control on the one hand, and on the other the widely-held concern 'that rationing degraded people, morally and culturally, and perverted their progress towards citizenship'.<sup>17</sup> This view was also expressed by missionaries, who believed that rationing without requiring labour in return was 'totally destructive for the spirit'.<sup>18</sup> Recipients of rations in government institutions and church missions were, as a result of this belief, required to undertake some form of work, in part to reduce the running costs of institutions, but principally 'as a form of redemption' to offset rationing's pauperising effects.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, pastoralists portrayed their relationship with Aboriginal station residents as principally a rationing relationship, in return for which recipients were required to undertake some form of labour on request.

The relationship between pastoralists and Aboriginal people extended beyond that of distributor and recipient of rations, however. Unlike government institutions and missions, Pilbara stations operated as commercial enterprises which depended on Aboriginal labour. In the decades leading up to the strike, tension existed between understandings of the pastoralists' role as employers of Aboriginal labour, and the role they undertook on the government's behalf in maintaining colonial governance through rationing. The Western Australian Department of Native Affairs grappled with the dual nature of the pastoralists' relationship with Aboriginal people, creating legislative and administrative mechanisms to facilitate the role they played in colonial governance, while at the same time attempting to police their use of Aboriginal labour through a system of employment permits. Departmental attempts to regulate and formalise the relationship were resented and resisted by pastoralists, who consistently responded to government intervention in their relationship with Indigenous people by threatening to withdraw from their role as distributors of rations, and to throw onto the taxpayer the burden of caring for people considered incapable of caring for themselves. Despite their dependence on Aboriginal labour, pastoralists underplayed its value, casting themselves as carers rather than as employers, and portraying

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<sup>17</sup> Rowse, *White Flour*, 25.

<sup>18</sup> C. G. Teichmann, *Diary 1839-1846*, Translated by Markus Kreig. Lutheran Archives, North Adelaide, 2.

<sup>19</sup> Jessie Mitchell, "'Country Belonging to Me": Land and Labour on Aboriginal Missions and Protectorate Stations, 1830-1850', *Eras Journal* 6 (2004), [www.arts.monash.edu.au/publications/eras/edition-6/mitchellarticle.php](http://www.arts.monash.edu.au/publications/eras/edition-6/mitchellarticle.php).

Aboriginal people as dependents, tolerated and rationed as the original owners of station country.

An illustration of pastoralists' view of their relationship with Aboriginal labour can be found in statements made in 1939 by the manager of Mulyie Station, on the Pilbara's De Grey River, when he was asked by the Native Affairs Department to pay the travelling costs to Port Hedland for medical treatment of a *marrngu* woman, Waterlily. The travelling medical inspector claimed that Waterlily worked as a domestic servant at Mulyie, as he had seen her cleaning shoes and delivering hot water at the homestead. The manager, however, denied that Waterlily was an employee, arguing that she was 'a good old thing', who would offer to help out in the house whenever she was at the station. 'She looks on this as home' he wrote, 'and likes to do a little now and then but is a free agent and comes and goes as she pleases. What better can she have – food, clothing and a home'. This, he believed, was 'the ideal help that the country can give the native'. His resentment at the department's insistence that he pay Waterlily's train fare was grounded, in Rowse's terms, 'in the specific condition in which Aborigines became visible to [him], as recipients of rations and as occasional workers'.<sup>20</sup> 'If the Department insists on us paying her train fares and other expenses', the manager wrote to the company owners of the station, 'please ask them to provide for her and I'll see she does no work for us although she will be disappointed if she is told to go back to camp'. Listing other residents who were 'fed and clothed' at Mulyie, he wrote that he 'would like something definite from the department as to what they propose to do for these people if they do not approve of the treatment they are getting at Mulyie'.<sup>21</sup>

Waterlily seems to have understood her relationship with station management as involving an obligation to provide some labour in return for 'food, clothing and a home'. Although rations are usually understood to have been a form payment for work undertaken by Aboriginal people, a more accurate understanding of labour relations on stations may be that labour was an obligation imposed by the rationing relationship.<sup>22</sup>

The two-fold nature of the relationship between pastoralists and Aboriginal people can be found in the fact that while they saw their role principally in terms of the rationing relationship, pastoralists also paid a

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<sup>20</sup> Rowse, *White Flour*, 126.

<sup>21</sup> Manager of Mulyie Station to Commissioner, 4 June 1939; Managing Director, De Grey River Pastoral Co. to Bray, 15 September 1939, SROWA, cons 7198, series 2030, 1937/0432/21–5.

<sup>22</sup> Rowse, *White Flour*, 144.

small wage to some Aboriginal workers. While Waterlily and other casual workers like her would have neither expected nor received any payment for the work they did, other workers – usually men rather than women – did receive a small wage of between 10/- and £1/10 per week.<sup>23</sup> The payment of wages at these rates did not undermine the rationing relationship, as *marrngu* who received wages remained dependent on stations for rations, a place of residence and access to country. Moreover, because deductions could be made from wages to pay for clothing and other items, *marrngu* sometimes found themselves bound to stations through debt. According to Sam Coppin, some workers found themselves in debt to stations 'all year round. Never get off the debt, all the time. That's the way keep us there all the time. Man want to go away, he get the police, fetch him back, because you owe too much to the station'.<sup>24</sup> In 1952 the mining cooperative set up by *marrngu* following the strike paid £50 to Corunna Downs Station to free workers from their debt to the station store.<sup>25</sup>

## Intimidation and coercion

Rationing as a means of colonial governance was a feature of Aboriginal administration formulated on an assumption that Aboriginal people were incapable of adjusting to the modern world and needed to be controlled for their own protection. In more southern regions of Western Australia, the restrictive legislation of the *Native Administration Act*, frequently administered by the police, was the principal instrument of the policy of 'protection' in the 1930s and 1940s. In the pastoral regions of the north, a somewhat different system of controls existed, centered on pastoralist control over Aboriginal access to rations and country, and supported by police action. 'On control issues', McGrath writes, 'settlers and police cooperated closely'.<sup>26</sup>

Along with rations, residence on stations provided Aboriginal people with access to country. Rations were supplemented by bush food obtained in the vicinity of the homestead on weekends, while the seasonal nature of the work freed workers to maintain connection with country and kin away

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<sup>23</sup> Native Affairs Inspector Laurie O'Neill, statement dated 24 May 1946, SROWA, cons 993, series 2030, 1945/0800/133-5.

<sup>24</sup> Sam Coppin in *How the West was Lost: The Story of the 1946 Aboriginal Pastoral Workers' Strike*, dir. David Noakes (Perth: Friends Film Productions and Market Street Films Ltd, 1987), DVD.

<sup>25</sup> McLeod, statement to committee investigating native labour, 18 March 1952, SROWA, cons 3390, series 20, 1952/0830/106.

<sup>26</sup> McGrath, *Born in the Cattle*, 119.

from their station of residence during the wet season, and to maintain their religious and ceremonial life. But Aboriginal use of the land was always at the discretion of the pastoralists, who maintained control over access through rationing and police pressure. In 1943, for example, a policeman moved about 30 Aboriginal people from a Pilbara pastoral lease following complaints by the manager that 'they were starting to make a nuisance of themselves, and that while they remained there he could get no good out of his own Station Natives'.<sup>27</sup>

Mechanisms of control over Aboriginal people in the Pilbara included agreement between pastoralists not to employ Aboriginal workers from other stations. This was 'an unwritten law', according to Holthouse, that was 'rigidly enforced and assisted by the police'.<sup>28</sup> In 1944, after several stations complained that workers had failed to return from a holiday, the local policeman moved among *marrngu* attending an initiation ceremony and saw that 'several parties of natives started for their homestations' when the proceedings were over.<sup>29</sup> According to Pitpit (Billy Thomas), 'if anyone stayed away for longer than two weeks, they'd send the police out after us, and the police would hunt us back to work on the station'.<sup>30</sup> *Marrngu* who left stations where their labour was required were also forced to return by the police.<sup>31</sup> Kangkushot (Peter Coppin) recalled that 'those days, police and station owners work together. Anyone run way bang him in gaol, ring up the boss and say I got your boy in gaol. What about come and pick him up'.<sup>32</sup> During the strike *marrngu* cited this lack of freedom to move between stations as one of their principal grievances.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>27</sup> D. M. McMahon, police journal 29 October 1940, SROWA, cons 430, series 76, 1939/1777v7.

<sup>28</sup> Holthouse, *One Life*, 19.

<sup>29</sup> Les Fletcher, 1 October 1944, SROWA, 1939/1777v7.

<sup>30</sup> 'Marrngu puji wanikinyiyi palanga punyja pala *week-ijirri miss'm kunymanakata ngakanikinyinganaka policeman-ju hunt'm out go back station-karti warrkamkarti. Jinangu again we'll go back. They get sick of it palanmartaku*'. Pitpit, address to school children at Wuntilurr (Skull Springs), 21 September 1992, translated by Barbara Hale and Mark Clendon, Nyangumarta Oral History, Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) Collection, Canberra. All oral history quotations recorded by the author unless otherwise indicated. All Nyangumarta recordings transcribed and translated by Barbara Hale and Mark Clendon.

<sup>31</sup> See, for example, McRae, police patrol report 1 Dec 1943, SROWA, 1939/1777v7.

<sup>32</sup> Peter Coppin, interview recorded by Bill Bunbury for Radio National's 'Hindsight' series *It's Not the Money It's the Land*, December 2000, cited in Bunbury, *It's Not the Money It's the Land: Aboriginal Stockmen and the Equal Wages Case* (North Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 2002), 45.

<sup>33</sup> Keith Weaver, police patrol report 5 Oct 1947, SROWA, cons 430, series 76, 1946/2538 v8.



*Marrngu* have also identified as a cause of the strike the level of intimidation they suffered, and the constant fear of violence and imprisonment that kept them subservient. Intimidation and violence are features of colonial situations in which a small and widely dispersed settler population is acutely aware of its vulnerability in the midst of a larger indigenous population. In the aftermath of colonial occupation, the need to remind indigenous people of settler capacity for violence was seen as essential for maintaining settler control.<sup>34</sup> The threat of physical violence was a constant presence for Pilbara Aboriginal people in the 1930s and 1940s. Physical punishment was used by Pilbara station managers, and their wives also used physical punishment when 'breaking in' young domestic servants.<sup>35</sup> As late as the 1940s Aboriginal people could be arrested on minor charges and transported in chains, and as 'Protectors of Natives' were also the police, they received little legal protection. Aboriginal people were kept fearful through repeated displays of violence. The practice of killing dogs belonging to Aboriginal people, usually carried out by the police in response to complaints made by pastoralists, was central to this program of intimidation. Dog culls were routinely carried out without warning in pre-dawn raids on *marrngu* camps, which, given the history of violence in pastoral areas, must have been terrifying for the Aboriginal people involved. These raids often seem to have had no other purpose than to create fear. In 1943, for example, a policeman on patrol found two young *marrngu* women alone at a remote station outcamp, presumably the sexual partners of the absent station worker who lived there. At dawn the following morning, he 'revealed [his] identity to the gins, destroyed their two dogs and moved on at 6 am'.<sup>36</sup> Monty Hale recalled a pre-dawn raid on his family's camp at the Moolyella tin field, near Marble Bar, in the 1930s. 'We just sat down quietly', he wrote, 'and when the police went back we cried for all those dogs'.<sup>37</sup> Through such violence, settler society reasserted and restated its domination over Aboriginal people. 'The possibility of violence' Rowse writes, 'underlay all transactions'.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Oral history accounts provide evidence of early violence, for example Pirntilkampanyaja (Mac Gardiner), 5 August 1993, Warralong, AIATSIS, recording 13.

<sup>35</sup> Pirntilkampanyaja, 29 September 1993, Shaw River, author's collection, recording 21; Caroline Jula, 13 August 1991, Woodstock Station, author's collection, recording 1.

<sup>36</sup> McRae, patrol report, 28 October 1944, SROWA, 1939/1777v7.

<sup>37</sup> Monty Hale, 'Early Memories', *Mikurrunya* 6, no. 2 (1984).

<sup>38</sup> Rowse, *White Flour*, 64; see also McGrath, *Born in the Cattle*, 106; Deborah Bird Rose, *Hidden Histories: Black Stories from Victoria River Downs, Humbert River and Wave Hill Stations* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 1991), 210.

*Marrngu* later recalled the humiliation they suffered in their day-to-day interactions with pastoralists and the police as a result of this intimidation. Pitpit remembered an occasion in Nullagine, for example, when a big group of people was singing:

The policeman come along, 'what you fellas making all this noise? Can't you go to bed? Too much noise, I can't even sleep'. Well people can't help, can't put up for it, they just got to go away. They were frightened of the policeman, because they might go to jail. They were the boss for us. Always, you know, frightened of them. Treat us like animal.<sup>39</sup>

Pitpit specifically identified the desire to break through the fear of violence and prosecution that kept them powerless and subservient as a reason for the strike:

We got to give the people some right, [and] they'll be ready for everything. That's what we're doing, because squatter always growl, growl, growl all the time ... We were really frightened we might get a hiding or go in jail or something like that.<sup>40</sup>

## Protection

*Marrngu* were not entirely powerless in their relationship with pastoralists. Workers sometimes responded to unfair treatment by going bush at a time when their labour was needed. The manager of Bungalow Station was reluctant to shoot troublesome dogs during the shearing, fearing his workers would 'clear out' and leave him short-handed. Once the shearing was over, however, he made a complaint to the police who killed the dogs in a dawn raid.<sup>41</sup> Nevertheless, Aboriginal people had very little room to manoeuvre within the relationship; it was, as Hess claims, a matter of 'bargaining at the margins'.<sup>42</sup>

The Bungalow Station manager's decision to have dogs killed by the police, rather than killing them himself, suggests that the relationship was more complex than simply the exercise of violent control and intimidation. Snowy Jittermarra hinted at this when he talked about the police returning workers to their stations at the end of a holiday period. 'Sometime we might [be] running late', he said,

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<sup>39</sup> Pitpit (Billy Thomas) in *How the West was Lost*.

<sup>40</sup> Pitpit, 6 October 1993, Warralong, author's collection, recording 2.

<sup>41</sup> McMahon, police patrol report, 3 July 1940, SRCWA, 1939/1777v7.

<sup>42</sup> Hess, 'Black and Red', 66.

well we see the policeman coming ... All the boys there, how many people belong to the Noreena or Bonney Downs, he sort them out, ... well we got to walk back to station. And squatter was happy, 'oh, you come back?' Never say anything.<sup>43</sup>

Snowy's statement 'never say anything' suggests that the collusion between pastoralists and the police was known but not explicitly acknowledged. A different relationship, based on paternalism and loyalty, masked the use of police force and the threat of violence inherent in the relationship. Paradoxically, while pastoralists initiated police action against *marrngu*, they also offered protection from such action. According to John Bucknall, Monty Hale's family, newly arrived in the pastoral regions from the Great Sandy Desert, shifted from the Moolyella tin field to Mount Edgar Station as a direct result of the killing of their dogs in a dawn raid.<sup>44</sup> Without dogs it was more difficult to live by hunting, but their move to Mount Edgar was probably also motivated by the perception that station residence offered a degree of protection from violent acts of this nature.

*Marrngu* were also kept fearful by the practice of child removal, and action taken by some pastoralists to prevent the removal of children served to reinforce the bond of protection and obligation that existed between *marrngu* and their bosses. In 1939 police complained that their attempt to remove three 'half-caste' girls from Warrawagine Station had been obstructed by the actions of the manager and his wife in sending the girls away when the Native Affairs officer arrived to collect them.<sup>45</sup> Nyirrarlpi (Maggie Ginger) remembers being sent into hiding by the manager of Muccan Station whenever the arrival of a doctor or police officer was imminent. When, as occasionally happened, police searched the area for children, the manager would lead them away from the children's hiding place, according to Nyirrarlpi.<sup>46</sup> That all the children at Muccan were sent into hiding, not just those in danger of removal as 'half-castes', raises the question of whether pastoralists used the fear of child removal to continually re-establish *marrngu* dependence on stations as sites of protection from police action, and to reinforce a sense of obligation to pastoralists who acted in their defence.

The persistent threat of violence, together with paternalistic protection from violence, served to strengthen the bond between Aboriginal workers

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<sup>43</sup> Snowy Jittermarra, 5 August 1993, Warralong, author's collection, recording 1.

<sup>44</sup> John Bucknall, 'Jacob Oberdoo (Minyjun) 1920s-1989 (first draft)', unpublished paper, 3.

<sup>45</sup> Gordon Marshall to Commissioner Neville, SROWA, cons. 7198, series 2032, 1939/1226/3.

<sup>46</sup> Nyirrarlpi (Maggie Ginger), 15 June 1993, South Hedland, AIATSIS, recording 27.

and management and foster in Aboriginal people a sense of loyalty to their station. According to McGrath 'the paternalistic relationship, with its elements of humanity and harshness, welded master and servant into a continuing contract with complex reciprocal obligations'.<sup>47</sup>

## Sit-down strike

The decision to conduct a strike grew out of discussions carried out between *marrngu* and a non-Aboriginal prospector and contractor, Don McLeod. Although his membership of the Australian Communist Party and previous political activities convinced authorities that the strike was instigated by McLeod, Aboriginal people insist that 'it was *marrngu* who started the strike, not him'.<sup>48</sup> They claim that *marrngu* had been wondering 'how we going to help ourself?'<sup>49</sup> and discussing their situation between themselves for years before McLeod's involvement. Asked by *marrngu* what they could do to improve their circumstances, McLeod recommended that they withhold their labour in a strike. He suggested 1 May as a good day to strike, both for its symbolism and the fact that it coincided with the beginning of the shearing season, when Aboriginal labour was in greatest demand for the muster. It was hoped that a complete withdrawal of Aboriginal labour at this crucial time of the year would severely affect operations and bring pastoralists to the negotiating table over their Aboriginal workers' demand for increased wages, better working conditions, and the right to choose a Protector to look after their welfare.

Although it was claimed at the time, and is still often claimed today, that 800 Aboriginal people walked off Pilbara stations on 1 May 1946, this first attempt at strike action was not a walk-off but a 'sit down'.<sup>50</sup> It was also far more uncertain and tentative than its mythology suggests. Although many of the workers on stations across the eastern Pilbara and in Marble Bar did attempt or intend to take strike action that day by remaining in camp and refusing to work, mechanisms of control were brought into

<sup>47</sup> McGrath, *Born in the Cattle*, 121; see also Anthony, 'Labour Relations', 120.

<sup>48</sup> Pitpit, address to school children at Wuntilurr.

<sup>49</sup> Jittermarra, 5 Aug 1993.

<sup>50</sup> For example, Provisional Committee for Defence of Native Rights, circular, 23 May 1946; McLeod to Ron Hurd, Secretary Seamen's Union Fremantle Branch, 14 April 1949, D. W. McLeod, Correspondence 1947-1967, Batty Library, Perth, 5121A /1. See also Wikipedia contributors, '1946 Pilbara Strike', *Wikipedia the Free Encyclopedia*, accessed 18 November 2013, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1946\\_Pilbara\\_strike](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1946_Pilbara_strike); <http://www.iww.org.au/node/993>; [http://moadoph.gov.au/exhibitions/online/marntiwarajanga/the\\_1946\\_strike.html](http://moadoph.gov.au/exhibitions/online/marntiwarajanga/the_1946_strike.html).

play to end the strike almost before it began. On 29 April the manager of Warrawagine Station, a large station running both sheep and cattle, contacted Constable Gordon Marshall of Marble Bar to inform him that Aboriginal workers had given notice of their intention to strike. Marshall immediately travelled to Warrawagine and successfully persuaded sheep musterers at the shearing shed at Pintunya (Sheep Camp) to return to work, before confronting striking cattle musterers near the homestead. 'No force or threats of any kind were brought to bear', he wrote. 'However, I did warn them, that if any one of them tried to make another stop work, they would get into serious bother'. One of the cattlemen, however, claimed that Marshall did use the threat of arrest, tipping chains from a bag onto the ground and asking 'You want this one?'. Learning from Marshall that the musterers at Pintunya had returned to work, the cattlemen also returned to their jobs.<sup>51</sup>

Over the following days Marshall patrolled the district, talking to Aboriginal workers at each station in the presence of the manager, and in every case was able to convince strikers to return to work or persuade those who were considering striking not to do so. 'Pastoralists were very thankful for this patrol', Marshall wrote, '& I feel sure that it will have a good effect on the native generally'.<sup>52</sup> Although Marshall's report suggests that *marrngu* had been easily persuaded through friendly discussion, it is likely that similar threats were used to those he successfully employed at Warrawagine. As *marrngu* on each station were persuaded not to strike, Marshall was able truthfully to inform those at succeeding stations that the strike had collapsed. On these isolated stations, workers had no way of ascertaining whether or not others were striking. The following month Marshall was able to report that 'the native strike affair is fairly well settled in this district'.<sup>53</sup>

Aboriginal workers on stations in the Port Hedland district also took strike action on or around 1 May. People on Strelley and De Grey Stations returned to work after their demand for an increase of 5/- per week was granted for the duration of the shearing in lieu of the usual 'bonus' of an issue of clothing and blankets given at the end of the shearing. At De Grey, the increase was granted to only some of the workers, who forfeited their pay increase when they realised that others were worse off in having to purchase clothes and blankets. At Mundabullangana Station, the manager responded to the strike by calling on Police Constable Les

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<sup>51</sup> Kujupurra, Warrawagine Station, 1991, AIATSIS, recording 2.

<sup>52</sup> Marshall, Police Report, 2 May 1946, SROWA, cons 430, series 76, 1943/0099v7.

<sup>53</sup> Marshall to Inspector Reid, 2 June 1946, SROWA, 1943/0099v7.

Fletcher of Port Hedland to remove from the station those he considered 'troublemakers', as well as non-working station residents, including old people and children. At Indee Station, the manager sacked and evicted all his Aboriginal workers and their families. Constable Fletcher and a Native Affairs officer carried out a patrol to stations throughout the district and 'warned the natives not to cease work'.<sup>54</sup> They too were able to report that they had successfully checked strike action and that shearing was progressing normally.

After the poor success of this initial action, a meeting was planned for 25 May to be attended by delegates from each station, in order, McLeod said, 'to clarify reports of strike progress and straighten out tangled versions'.<sup>55</sup> However, before this meeting could be held, strike organisers Clancy McKenna and Dooley Binbin were arrested and charged with a breach of State legislation which made it illegal to 'entice or persuade a native to leave any lawful service'. Arrested on 8 and 9 May, they incurred three-month prison sentences with hard labour but received a remission of their sentences after McLeod was convicted on 21 June on three counts of 'enticement'.<sup>56</sup>

## From 'sit-down' to 'walk-off'

*Marrngu* learnt important lessons from the failures of 1 May. The sit-down strike had been defeated by the very mechanisms of control that had kept Aboriginal labour subservient. Isolated station communities had found it impossible to resist the combined pressure of the appeal of pastoralists to whom they were bound in webs of obligation, and police intimidation with its threat of chains and imprisonment.

In order to alter the conditions under which they lived, the first thing that Aboriginal people needed to do was find a way to protect themselves from police threats and intimidation. The opportunity for group action came at the end of July when station people from across the region, including about 150 *marrngu*, converged on Port Hedland for the annual races. Ordered by the police to camp out of town at the 4 Mile camp, *marrngu* defied the police in a show of strength and walked en masse,

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<sup>54</sup> Fletcher, Police Patrol Report, SROWA, 1949/1777v7; O'Neill, Extract from Journal, 11 May 1946, SROWA, 1945/0800/126-7.

<sup>55</sup> McLeod, High Court Appeal, 48, National Archives of Australia (NAA), A10074, 1947/8, 9, 10.

<sup>56</sup> Marshall, Police Patrol Report, 9 May 1946, SROWA, 1943/0099v7; McBeath to McDonald, 9 April 1947, page 3, SROWA, cons 993, series 2030 1947/0305/84.

during the night of 27 July, to the Two Mile camp.<sup>57</sup> Given the climate of intimidation and the persistent threat of violence and prosecution under which *marrngu* lived, their shift to the Two Mile required remarkable courage, as John Wilson has argued.<sup>58</sup> Awaiting the arrival of the police the following morning *marrngu* formulated ways to resist police intimidation without violence and successfully stood their ground when the police arrived.<sup>59</sup> In further demonstrations of strength a few days later, they walked into town to demand the ration coupons they needed to purchase sugar and tea, and a group of men marched to the police station to demand the release of McLeod from the lockup where they believed he was being held.

An important tactic developed at this time was that of responding to police intimidation by crowding around the officer concerned in a non-violent display of strength of numbers. Authorities found it impossible to speak to individuals or small groups without being surrounded by a large number of people, and saw this as evidence that strike organisers were employing stand-over tactics to prevent others returning to stations.<sup>60</sup> Such tactics were essential, however, if *marrngu* were to avoid police intimidation. During the course of the strike, *marrngu* came to view imprisonment as a badge of honour in their struggle for better conditions, and the use of police intimidation and fear of imprisonment became an increasingly ineffective means of control.<sup>61</sup>

The second thing *marrngu* needed to do to change the condition of their lives was to free themselves from the obligations that attended residence on stations and town reserves. Domestic servants employed in Marble Bar had been forced out of town to the Moolyella tin field by Constable Marshall when they struck on 1 May, on the ground that only those who were 'indigent' or employed were permitted to live on the town reserve. Their eviction, together with that of all residents from Indee Station, and of non-workers and 'trouble makers' from Mundabullangana, provided evidence that residence on town reserves and stations was contingent

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<sup>57</sup> Aboriginal people were forbidden from entering Port Hedland which had been declared a prohibited area during the war.

<sup>58</sup> John Wilson, 'Authority and Leadership in a "New Style" Aboriginal Community: Pindan, Western Australia' (Masters thesis, University of Western Australia, 1961), 63.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>60</sup> Fletcher to Bray, 16 August 1946, SROWA, cons. 993, series 2030, 1946/0799/37.

<sup>61</sup> The Western Australian Commissioner of Native Welfare wrote in 1957 that Pilbara Aboriginal people welcomed prosecution and imprisonment when they were, 'as they put it, "battlin' for their rights"', Middleton to Minister Brady, 16 May 1957, SROWA 1957/0509/10. See also Anne Scrimgeour, "'Battlin' for their rights": Aboriginal Activism and the Leper Line', *Aboriginal History*, 36 (2012): 43–65.

upon compliance with settler authority. The timing of the 1 May strike to coincide with a period of high labour demand on stations effectively prevented more widespread evictions, although some pastoralists did threaten to undertake 'a very severe culling out' of their Aboriginal station population when the shearing was over.<sup>62</sup> *Marrngu* pre-empted such an action by leaving the stations before any such 'culling out' could be achieved.

Thirdly, *marrngu* needed to extricate themselves from their complex relationship of mutual dependence and obligation with pastoralists. Their ability to do so was helped by the fact that they 'felt strongly' the pastoralists' refusal to negotiate wage increases, 'not so much from the point of remuneration' according to John Wilson, but because there had been 'a widespread refusal'. 'They had been "knocked-back"', Wilson writes, 'not merely as individuals but collectively'.<sup>63</sup> That they should feel this 'knock-back' so strongly suggests that, despite the uneven power relations on stations, they believed their relationship with pastoralists entitled them to be taken seriously in their request for increased wages. In their collective refusal to negotiate, pastoralists lost some degree of authority in the eyes of their Aboriginal workers. Peter Kolchin notes similar tendencies in protests staged by Russian serfs in the early nineteenth century, which frequently began with a petition to the serf owner or some other authority. Kolchin writes that serfs were usually disappointed with the result of their petition, believing that they had 'legitimate grievances that only had to be revealed to be remedied'. Following the failure of their petition, serfs would refuse to recognise the authority of their owner or would cease working for him.<sup>64</sup> Similarly, *marrngu* accounts of the Pilbara strike indicate that following the 1 May attempt to negotiate wage increases, Aboriginal workers rejected the authority of 'even the squatter' by refusing to recognise or listen to them. 'We saw everybody coming', Pitpit said. 'Policemen, detectives, our bosses. We told them, "where are you from? We don't know you"'.<sup>65</sup> 'We're not listening', Pirntilkampanyaja (Mac Gardner) recalled. 'Even the squatter, we're not listening, we're going. We're getting nothing from you, we're doing a good job for you, no wages ... Welfare, policemen, we tell them, squatters. We was that strong'.<sup>66</sup>

<sup>62</sup> Fletcher to Commissioner, 2 May 1946, SROWA, 1945/0800/56.

<sup>63</sup> Wilson, 'Authority and Leadership', 59.

<sup>64</sup> Peter Kolchin, *Unfree Labour: American Slavery and Russian Serfdom* (Cambridge and London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1987), 258.

<sup>65</sup> 'Yanayirni palanga policeman-pa detective, everybody, we see'm coming maajaja nganarnamili. We tell'm, "where you from? We don't know you"', Pitpit, address to school children at Wantilurr.

<sup>66</sup> Pirntilkampanyaja, recording 21.



Following the strike of 1 May, it seems, neither pastoralists nor *marrngu* were prepared to continue to fulfill their obligations within the rationing arrangement, and 'its enduring but culturally tenuous nexus was broken'.<sup>67</sup> Only seven of the 150 *marrngu* who attended the Port Hedland race meeting at the end of July returned to their station employment when the races ended.<sup>68</sup> Instead, they established a camp at the Twelve Mile, 20 kilometres from Port Hedland, while Dooley and a few others joined those evicted from Marble Bar at Moolyella, where they could earn a living mining alluvial tin.<sup>69</sup> Over the following months the number of strikers grew steadily. Monty Hale's family and other *marrngu* joined Dooley at Moolyella instead of returning to their stations after the Marble Bar races in mid-September.<sup>70</sup> Other workers left stations as opportunity presented itself. According to Kujupurra, '*marrngu* left Warrawagine Station a few at a time; some left, and then the next week somebody else might go. In the end we left it without any Aboriginal workers; only a few stayed'.<sup>71</sup> By November there were 150 strikers at Moolyella, with the number increasing each week 'owing to more of the station natives going on strike' and 'practically every station' in the Marble Bar district was affected 'by the loss of some if not all of their natives, over the strike'.<sup>72</sup> The number of people in the strike communities fluctuated during the course of the strike but probably numbered between two and four hundred at any given time. Although the strike never succeeded in achieving a complete withdrawal of Aboriginal labour in the area, Pilbara stations were affected by the loss of so many of their workers.

## Striking for better working conditions, or seeking independence?

Pastoralists, the police, and officers of the Native Affairs Department initially expected that the strike would be short-lived. Jenny Hardie,

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<sup>67</sup> Rowse, *White Flour*, 127.

<sup>68</sup> O'Neill, *Native Affairs Journal*, 30 July 1946, SROWA, cons 993, series 2030, 1946/1306/6.

<sup>69</sup> Marshall, police patrol report, 7 August 1946, SROWA, cons. 430, series 76, 1946/2538 v8/1.

<sup>70</sup> Monty Hale (Minyjun) *Kurlumarniny: We Come From the Desert* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2012): 22–3.

<sup>71</sup> 'Little bit at a time yanikinyi, jinta finish yaninyikinyi. Ah, might be warinyji wiyikingi, he going again. Palalju empty yanayirna no Marrngu, only few, waninyikinyi'. Kujupurra, June 1993, Mijijimaya, AIATSIS, recording 4.

<sup>72</sup> Marshall, Patrol Report, 24 November 1946, SROWA, 1946/2538 v8; Marshall to McBeath, 26 November 1946, SROWA, cons 993, series 2030 1943/0621/17.

who married into a Pilbara pastoralist family in the 1960s, wrote that pastoralists could not understand why *marrngu* would leave 'their own country – their station homes where they were fed and nursed and had an easy-going life that appealed to them'.<sup>73</sup> They hoped that their relationship with Aboriginal workers, together with police pressure, could again be used to persuade *marrngu* that their interests would best be served by adherence to the rationing relationship. They appealed to *marrngu* attachment and sense of loyalty to their former station of residence.<sup>74</sup> *Marrngu* at the strike camps came under sustained pressure from pastoralists and the police to return to station employment. Caroline Jula, who joined the strike camp at Moolyella from Warrawagine Station, recalled the police coming 'every morning' to see Dooley, pressuring him to send workers back to the stations. But the strikers were far more intransigent than the police expected. 'We say no', Jula said. 'We're not going any more. Strike, strike, we strike, in Moolyella. We got self, we got to work living self'.<sup>75</sup>

Strikers based at the Twelve Mile formed working parties to undertake fishing, dryshelling, kangarooing and prospecting activities. By September the police reported that 'a more or less permanent camp', including some 'quite substantial spinifex sheds' and a small garden, had been established.<sup>76</sup> Schools run by *marrngu* teachers were established at both camps. New forms of social organisation developed within these communities, with traditional social structures being adjusted to meet the requirements of large working groups. The Acting Commissioner of Native Affairs, Lew McBeath, noted that a 'certain measure of control' had 'definitely passed over to ... elderly men' who had previously travelled 'from one station property to another, existing fairly well upon the proceeds of gambling, and also from the standing they possess as elders'. He believed that this made the situation in the Pilbara 'more involved', as the persistence of the strikers' camps provided these senior men with 'a certain amount of authority and standing'.<sup>77</sup>

For many *marrngu*, the establishment of independent communities away from the paternalistic control of pastoralists seems to have been an end in itself. From the early days of the strike, authorities reported

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<sup>73</sup> Jenny Hardie, *Nor'Westers of the Pilbara Breed* (Carlisle: Hesperian Press, 1988), 181.

<sup>74</sup> O'Neill to Commissioner, 21 June 1949, SROWA, cons 993, series 2030, 1949/0454/9.

<sup>75</sup> Caroline Jula, 5 November 1992, Woodstock Station, author's collection, recording 2.

<sup>76</sup> Fletcher to McBeath, 21 Sept 1946, SROWA, 1946/0799/54-6.

<sup>77</sup> McBeath to McDonald, 16 May 1947, SROWA, 1947/0305/116.

that many of the strikers showed little inclination to return to stations.<sup>78</sup> Even when wages and conditions on stations began to improve as a result of the strike, many continued to show little interest in returning. In April 1947 Acting Commissioner McBeath found that people he spoke to at Moolyella 'appeared to be quite firm in their resolve not to return to the stations even with the assurance that increases in wages and better living conditions would be forthcoming'.<sup>79</sup> The local Native Affairs officer, charged with the responsibility of finding a way to end the strike, expressed frustration at the refusal of strikers to return to work despite the concessions that had been granted. 'The Natives', he complained, 'refuse to accept work at increased rates, decline to accept the fact that better conditions will be provided for them and adopt an attitude of defiance'.<sup>80</sup>

Some *marrngu* had little reason to return to stations. For senior men and women who no longer had a role to play in station culture, the new communities offered communal life and positions of respect. While some people had close connections to particular stations, others had been more itinerant. Travelling between stations to obtain work where they could, and fossicking for tin and gold between jobs, these people had had greater autonomy than permanent station residents, but less security. For these people, membership of the new communities provided a level of social and economic protection.

Some strikers did, however, continue to identify the achievement of improved wages and conditions as reasons for remaining on strike. While some returned to station employment to take advantage of increased wages and better conditions promised by pastoralists, others held out for further improvements. Clancy McKenna told a Native Affairs officer in April 1947 that 'as they had stuck out for nine months, they would continue to stick out, and see what the natives still employed on the stations got in the way of better conditions and wages'.<sup>81</sup> Some strikers who saw their action as a temporary withdrawal of labour became frustrated as the strike dragged on, and pushed for more direct negotiations to achieve the economic objectives of the strike.

Tension arose in the strike camps between those who wanted to return to better working conditions on stations, and those who wanted to hold out for a greater degree of autonomy. In December 1946 a small group of

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<sup>78</sup> Marshall to McBeath, 30 November 1946, SROWA, 1943/0621.

<sup>79</sup> McBeath to McDonald, 29 April 1947, page 1, SROWA, 1943/0621/35.

<sup>80</sup> Jensen to McBeath, 30 April 1947, SROWA, 1947/0305/112.

<sup>81</sup> Jensen to McBeath, 12 April 1947, SROWA, cons 993, series 2030 1946/1416/13-14.

strikers at Moolyella, led by one of the strike leaders, Gordon Mackay, formed a breakaway group which attempted to negotiate a return to station employment in exchange for improved conditions, including 'reasonable sleeping quarters, a shade shed in which to have their meals, and to lay off in, a shower in which to wash, and the pit system lavatory'.<sup>82</sup> Mackay, one of the few literate strikers, wrote a letter the Australian Workers Union (AWU):

I beg to place before you the position of us natives up here in the nor west. We are all struggling to better our conditions both as for living & wages conditions we have as perhaps you know, come out solidly and still are out & refuse to go back to the conditions we are asked to live and work under. Your members come up here and work up here under totally different conditions. Have you made one effort to ours. You can get these bettered conditions for us and perhaps organise us a separate branch.<sup>83</sup>

The letter was not sent to the AWU but forwarded instead to the Native Affairs Department through Constable Marshall, possibly at Marshall's suggestion. The breakaway group was physically prevented from returning to station work by McKenna and other strikers, who took them to the Twelve Mile to prevent them from undermining the strike's longer-term objectives.<sup>84</sup>

Hokari has argued that securing better wages and conditions on stations was never a principal objective of action taken by Gurindji people, and that their 'walk-off' from Wave Hill Station was accordingly never really a strike. McKenna's statement to the police officer and MacKay's letter to the AWU indicate that these were major goals for at least some of the Pilbara strikers. The establishment of self-supporting communities, however, can be seen not only as an end in itself, as it appears to have been for many *marrngu*, but also as an essential component of the strikers' attempt to change employment conditions on stations. Writing from a global labour history perspective, Marcel van der Linden identifies 'the collective exit' as a form of protest undertaken particularly by workers who are unable to assert their interests collectively in the workplace, such as slaves, indentured labourers, journeymen, and wage earners in 'total institutions' like sailors. The distinction between the collective exit and the fight for better working conditions is, however, 'in reality rather

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<sup>82</sup> Marshall to Commissioner, 23 December 1946, SROWA, 1943/0621/22.

<sup>83</sup> Gordon Mackay to AWU Secretary, Perth, 18 December 1946, SROWA, 1943/0621/20.

<sup>84</sup> Yarrrie Jack (Jack Coppin) and Jackie Thompson, Police Statements, 5 and 8 January 1947, SROWA, 1947/0305/21-3.

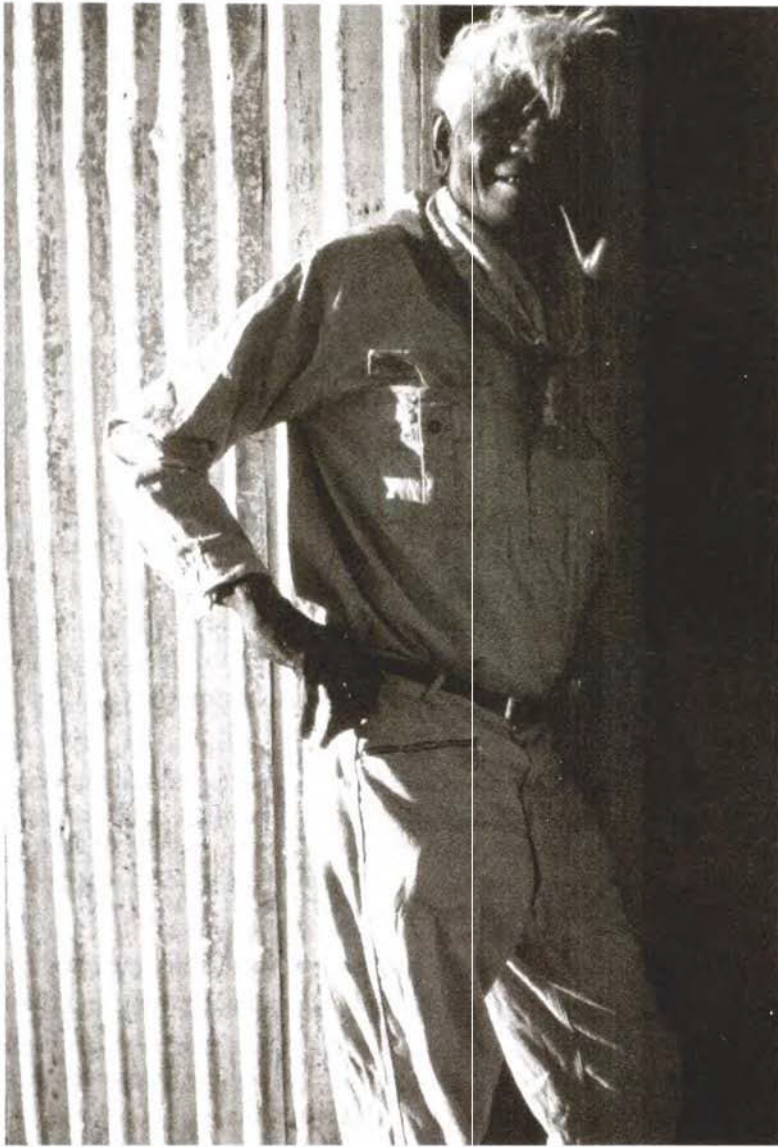


Figure 1. Gordon Mackay.  
Photography courtesy of John Wilson.

fluid', he writes.<sup>85</sup> *Marrngu* had been unable to assert their interests collectively by remaining on stations, which were both workplaces and their homes, and they needed to move away to negotiate change. Better wages and conditions were key features of the change they sought, but

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<sup>85</sup> Marcel van der Linden, *Workers of the World: Essays Towards a Global Labour History* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2008), 175, 179.

little real change could be effected without altering the basis on which *marrngu* were employed. They needed to free Aboriginal workers from the obligations and controls of the rationing system.

To change the basis of Aboriginal station employment, *marrngu* insisted that pastoralists only employ Aboriginal workers after first negotiating wages and working conditions with the strike leaders. Departmental attempts to negotiate an end to the strike consistently broke down over the issue of the authority of the strikers to negotiate labour conditions as a group, and over the basis on which Aboriginal workers were to be employed.<sup>86</sup> Although pastoralists agreed that wages demanded by strikers 'were not unreasonable and that if they were worth employing at all they were worth the conditions and wages usually asked for', they refused to accept the 'demand of the leaders that no native should be allowed to accept employment without their approval'. Payment of wages at the level demanded by strikers did not threaten the rationing relationship. On the other hand, for pastoralists to concede the authority of an Aboriginal organisation by allowing it to intercede between themselves and Aboriginal workers did threaten to disrupt the system of controls that underpinned labour relations. Pastoralists insisted that they had

the right to engage labour as required wherever they could contact the natives, either by going to Molyella [sic] or on the roads streets or in the bush wherever they might meet them, and that if there were any breaches of law and order the matter should be reported to the Police for the necessary action.<sup>87</sup>

By insisting that Aboriginal workers be employed on an individual basis, they hoped to reinstate relationships of personal obligation, and thereby to restore control.

The strike was moderately successful in achieving improvements in wages and working conditions on stations, but the goal of reforming the basis of labour relations saw it continue for three years. It ended in 1949 when an officer of the Native Affairs Department indicated a willingness to negotiate a scale of wages with strikers, but this limited concession was negated by departmental and government statements that the officer had no authority to do so.<sup>88</sup> The strike failed to achieve recognition of

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<sup>86</sup> Jensen to McBeath, 12 April 1947, SROWA, 1946/1416/13-4; McBeath to McDonald, 28 April 1947, SROWA, 1947/0305/104-5.

<sup>87</sup> O'Neill, Native Affairs Report, 29 March 1949, SROWA, 1943/0621/125.

<sup>88</sup> *Western Australian Parliamentary Debates* 124, 23 August 1949.

the authority of an Aboriginal group to negotiate labour conditions, and failed, as a result, to reform labour relations.

The Aboriginal movement that had begun with the sit-down strike on 1 May 1946 continued after 1949, but its focus shifted away from the objective of improving pastoral labour conditions. While some workers returned to station employment, some of those who remained away joined McLeod in a prospecting and mining venture. This venture attracted increasing numbers of *marrngu* over the following months, including many of those who had returned to station employment, and by mid-1952 600 were involved in a cooperative mining company, Northern Development and Mining, and pastoralists were again facing severe labour shortages.<sup>89</sup> That so many chose to remain away from stations, or to leave them again, despite the improved conditions there and the harsh conditions of the mining camps, indicates that the establishment of an autonomous community had become the principal objective of the Pilbara movement by this time. That achieving autonomy had been an aspiration of *marrngu* since they began leaving stations following the failed sit-down strike of 1 May is indicated by the fact that many saw no disconnection between the industrial action of 1946–49 and their later involvement in the mining cooperatives, some claiming as late as the 1980s and 1990s that they were 'still in the strike today'.<sup>90</sup>

Features of labour relations that limit worker autonomy can in turn impose limits on the form of action available to workers to address their labour conditions, as this analysis of the Pilbara strike shows. Aboriginal labour in the Pilbara was an integral part of a system of colonial control that included both intimidation and paternalistic care and protection through rationing. To address their working conditions, Aboriginal people had to shift away from stations to free themselves from the obligations of the rationing relationship. The communities established as a result of the decision to leave the stations offered protection from intimidation, and a level of economic and political independence that appealed to many. They also provided the strikers with a position from which to negotiate better wages and conditions on stations, and to attempt to change the basis on which Aboriginal labour was employed.

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<sup>89</sup> Frank Gare, Report to committee investigating native labour, 15 March 1952; Pastoralists' Statements, 5–6 March 1952, SROWA, 1952/0830/115–19.

<sup>90</sup> Jittermarra in *How the West was Lost*.

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## About the author

Anne Scrimgeour completed a doctorate in 2007 on the history of South Australia's early 'civilising mission'. She has worked with Pilbara Aboriginal people to record, transcribe and translate oral history, and worked with Monty Hale to prepare his bilingual autobiography for publication, (*Kurlumarniny: We Come from the Desert*, Aboriginal Studies Press, 2012). She is currently consolidating her oral history and biographical work through archival research into the history of the 1946 Pilbara pastoral workers' strike and subsequent cooperative movement.

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