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PAPERS IN LABOUR HISTORY No. 12

Editor : Jill Milroy

Perth Branch, Australian Society for the Study of Labour History

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The Editor
Papers in Labour History
Department of Organisational and Labour Studies
The University of Western Australia
Nedlands WA 6009

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Papers in Labour History seeks to publish material of a serious nature about the historical development of the Labour Movement, and of the history of work in Western Australia. It is intended to carry a balance of contributions from students and workers and veterans of the Labour Movement. Naturally this raises controversial issues and no apology is made for the fact that few readers will be able to agree with all the views expressed here. While the editor has made suggestions regarding each of the contributions these have been of a stylistic nature and have not been intended in any way to interfere with the expression of the views of the authors.

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Telling Our Stories: An Introduction to Aboriginal Labour History

Jill Milroy and Michael Wright *

Historically Australia has been seen as the land of opportunity and Western Australia has seen itself as even more so, still promoting in the 1990's a policy of progress and development at any cost. In the 'lucky country' anyone can work hard and be rewarded with material progress and respect from their fellow Australians. Work, or more specifically working for monetary reward, has become the bench mark of self worth. Throughout Australia's history, while philanthropic groups were encouraged and 'welfare' payments developed they were always limited to ensure that 'workers' did not become 'bludgers'.

Historically the popular and prevailing stereotype of Aboriginal people has been one of 'laziness' and 'unreliability'; terms like 'going walkabout' have been applied to Aboriginal people for many years. This was coupled with a general belief that Aboriginal people were of low or limited intelligence and thus, even with education and training, incapable of doing more than manual labour or domestic work. Beginning in 1770 with Sir Joseph Banks' observations in regard to the 'Aborigines' lack of cultivation of the soil, he concluded that, "...their reason must be supposed to hold a rank little superior to monkeys".¹ Though clearly some gains were made, in 1926 the Superintendent of the Moore River Native reserve expressed the belief that beyond basic literacy,

"...it is doubtful where a school education is much benefit to them [Aboriginal people]. The most that can be expected for them and for which they seem best adapted is general housework for the girls...and for the boys training to farm and pastoral pursuits."²

Yet Aboriginal people led hard working lives though this was rarely recognised and even less often rewarded. Aboriginal labour history is littered with investigations and Royal Commissions, including Roth in 1904 and Moseley in 1934, into the conditions of labour and employment of Aboriginal people. In most cases the commissions' recommendations have revealed a system of exploitation and abuse but ultimately resulted in legislation designed ostensibly

* Michael Wright is a final year student in the Bachelor of Social Work at the University of Western Australia. He has taught Aboriginal Studies at Curtin University and hosted a weekly Aboriginal information segment on the ABC Radio's Gerry Gannon show.

for 'protection' of Aboriginal people. However in reality they were enacted to ensure compliance by Aboriginal 'workers' and to maintain a pool of cheap labour to be exploited in the so called progress and development of the great state of Western Australia. The role of Aboriginal labour in the economic development of the state has never been adequately recognised and the Aboriginal 'workers' rarely paid or compensated for their work. From the outset legislative solutions were always sought to the Aboriginal labour 'problem'. According to Hasluck, early attempts to regulate Aboriginal employment such as the Pearling Acts and the Aborigines Act 1886 were based on expediency and designed to deal with the problem of keeping native labour available under desirable conditions.³

While Aboriginal people 'enjoyed' their own special legislation in regard to employment they were not to gain from changes in working conditions for 'white' workers. Landmark decisions in Australian labour history such as the Harvester decision in 1907 which gave Australian workers access to a basic wage, a wage allowing for all contingencies, were not applied to Aboriginal people.⁴ At a time of what was seen as 'liberating' legislation for all white Australian workers, Aboriginal people in Western Australia had their working lives controlled by the Aborigines Act of 1905 through a system of employment permits that restricted, segregated and excluded Aboriginal people from white society and the operations of the mainstream labour market. The 1905 act was amended in 1936 becoming even more restrictive by enlarging the definition of 'Aborigines' coming under the Act and tightening its control of Aboriginal employment through the extension of the permit system to all casual and contract work. In 1938 William Cooper, writing on behalf of the Australian Aborigines' League protested to the Western Australian Premier about the legislation and in a letter to the Chief Secretary of Native Affairs stated :

"...we Aborigines keenly feel the repressive legislation under which the conditions of our race in Western Australia has been worsened. Conditions have always been worse in Western Australia than the rest of Australia and while we did not think it was possible for them to be worse than they were we have found that they have."⁵

The notion of a 'fair day's pay for a fair day's work' did not apply to Aboriginal people. The relationship between unions and Aboriginal people was neither close nor harmonious. At one level Aboriginal people simply lacked access to unions because they were not in the 'recognisable' workforce. At another level it

is also important to note that 'white' workers often saw Aboriginal people as a threat to own livelihoods and unions, supported by the Australian Labor Party campaigned for the removal of Aboriginal people from the workforce.⁶ Fortunately this relationship changed and unions have been active in supporting Aboriginal issues particularly in regard to site protection such as in the Nookanbah conflict and the Swan Brewery redevelopment.

Very little has been done in looking specifically at the 'labour' history of Aboriginal people, though discussion has been included within larger examinations of the Aboriginal 'question' in Western Australia and Aboriginal-European interaction since colonisation. In Western Australia much of what has been written has looked at the north of the state and in particular the role of Aboriginal people in the pastoral industry. Hasluck's *Black Australians* and Biskup's *Not Slaves Not Citizens* have concerned Aboriginal working conditions, detailing abuse and exploitation as well as the legislation enacted to ensure compliance by Aboriginal workers; Haebich's *For Their Own Good* has looked at similar issues in relation to the south-west.⁷ To date very few articles have appeared in *Papers in Labour History* concerned with Aboriginal labour history. Those that have dealt exclusively with the north of the state, the strike by pastoral workers in the Pilbara in 1946⁸ and the Noonkanbah conflict in the late seventies.⁹

Certainly many of the obvious barriers to Aboriginal participation in the workforce, such as restrictive legislation, have gone but less obvious barriers, such as attitudes, remain. The celebration of the great 'pioneers' in West Australia week each year fails to address the issue or the 'real' facts of Western Australia's history - the invasion and theft of Aboriginal lands and the reliance on the exploitation Aboriginal labour for much of the state's early development.

Aboriginal people, far from being 'lazy' were hardworking and of 'industrious habits', a requirement for those Aboriginal people applying for citizenship under the Native's Citizenship Act of 1944. A rather strange thing for the Australia's indigenous inhabitants as Jack McPhee recounts:

"It had never occurred to me that I might not be an Australian citizen. My mother had been here before any white people, so I'd never thought we might be considered strangers in our own country."¹⁰

Increasingly Aboriginal people are telling their stories. Sally Morgan's *My Place*, Glenyse Ward's *Wandering Girl* and Alice Nannup's *When the Pelican Laughed*, testify to the reliance of Western Australian society on the exploitation of the domestic labour of Aboriginal women from colonial until recent times.¹¹ Ward's dedication in *Wandering Girl* is,

"...for all the Aboriginal women who, as girls, had to face hard times working on white people's farms in the Great Southern and other districts of their own country".¹²

While politely referred to as 'domestic servants' many Aboriginal women endured appalling working conditions with little or no wages; sexual exploitation and abuse frequently accompanied 'domestic' service. Men's stories too have been told in compilations by non-Aboriginal author's such as in Clark's, *Yammatji*, and Shaw's, *When The Dust Comes In Between*.¹³

The articles in this issue of *Labour History* take up some of these themes and allow Aboriginal people to tell their stories. There is much more to be done.

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LEFT THE BOOMERANG IN THE FIELD

Jerry Morrison*

Forever in the ancient times
long before the whites came
work was straight survival kind
life enhanced abundance of game
Aboriginal men and women rested
when the sun was high
hunted and gathered substance
before it left the sky

Their kalleeps were clean
koolong-gurs never idle laughter played
no hunger no disease unseen
moorurt food share, displayed
inspired by the jang-ga
Nyoongahs were goort-gwab
laws made in the nyitting
told the dreaming of the "kanga"

Warra, weendung appeared whites
and claimed the sacred ground
swords and muskets, their might
declared the British empire found
Destruction of all black fullus
uncultured to toil and labour
our soil, our future crops
call this land terra nullius

Nyoongahs fenced from water holes
poisoned, shot, skinned, no salvation
don't trespass, venomously, they were told
all in the name of assimilation
On reserves outside of town
disgraceful, no water, no toilets
the way of life forever changed
people suffered without a sound

Farmers found the land hard
forced to cut trees like a man
burnt red by the elements charred
blisters appeared on the hand
realised, bloody hard yakka
have a pool of black labour
learn to make them work
for sugar, flour, tea and tobacco

Nyoongahs driven from their country
forced on reserves sad and sick
lined for government rations at humpy
they learnt how to use the pick
hunted possums, saved the dripping
to spread on dampers
seasonal work on the farms
and hard day bark stripping

To survive a hard bet
alien ethics of thought
work from sunrise to sunset
children to missions were brought
work nil legislation flora and fauna
officially dropped from the work force
Aboriginals everywhere live or die
conquered huddle in corner

Government had full control
permits to blacks work spectre
no good job no complaint told
would not listen Aboriginal protector
abused police officers rude
all the same in attitude
learn them to be civilised
law and order whites made crude

Nyoongahs cleared the trees
 with sharp axes swinging bright
 which rose up from the knees
 shoulders strong all their might
 ring bark white gums around
 winter kill summer time burn
 Nyoongahs learned the contract
 root picking sucker bashing on the ground

The old ones were parted
 children fair, no rearing
 no more corroboree started
 whites their social engineering
 better breed government missions work
 this was the Aboriginal occupation
 there was no workers compensation
 no wages no more ceremonial talk

The immigration covered the soil
 temper British attitude mateship
 pushed black hard toil
 Aboriginals again suffered hardship
 food and family were baulked

blacks did not have a chance
 their cycle no more balance
 machines foreigners contracts talked

Gone now are the Nyoongah totems
 the water and the law
 now are white diseases chosen
 measles, whooping cough, influenza, sore
 no more Nyoongah language real
 technology to the fore
 they shear the sheep
 with shears of steel
 and left the boomerang
 in the field

Nyoongah words

<i>kalleeps</i>	home fires
<i>koolong-gurs</i>	children
<i>moorurt</i>	blood people
<i>jang-ga</i>	the old people spirits
<i>goort-gwab</i>	good hearted
<i>nyitting</i>	cold ages
<i>warra,weendung</i>	bad, no good

* Jerry Morrison is a Nyoongah, a prominent artist and poet. Jerry's book of poetry "If dreams are made of this, then I'll keep on dreaming" was highly commended by the judges of the David Unaipon Award and he is currently working on a family history. He has also been very successful as an artist and since holding his first exhibition in 1990 has worked as a graphic artist. Jerry has recently received a fellowship from the Department of Arts to research and record sites of the South-west region of WA. Jerry returned to study as a mature age student and completed two years of a Bachelor of Arts at the University of Western Australia.

BEV PORT-LOUIS

Interview by Narelle Thorne:

Bev Port- Louis is a Nyoongar women, born and raised in Moora. Bev has been involved with the Aboriginal community in Moora and in Perth for most of her life, particularly in the education field.

Narelle: Where do you come from? Tell us about your family?

Bev: I'm the eldest of seven children. Dad and Mum originated from the Moora area, and I suppose most of our lives we were farming people. Went to school in Dandaragan primary school where we were the only Aboriginal family at that school until the family virtually moved into Moora.

Narelle: How long ago was that?

Bev: Well I left school in 1960.

Narelle: Have you worked most of your live? Or did you complete most of your schooling and then go on to work?

Bev: I left school at the age of sixteen, because it was only just Moora Junior District High. Because they established the Native Welfare Department and based an office in Moora I was given an opportunity to go and work for them.

Narelle: So were there many Aboriginal families living in Moora at that stage?

Bev: Well when we came into town, Moora still had its reserve, and there were eleven, no twelve houses on the Moora Native Reserve and there would have been about a half a dozen families living in town. Beside the Moora Reserve they had like a stepping stone, you had to come from the reserve and better yourself, because they were the old type three houses that they had. If you proved yourself from there, you went to another street called Clark Street, which had the old Native Welfare, type sixty four's. And they were a little bit bigger than those houses on the reserve, with three bedrooms, toilets and showers to

each house, and kitchen, dining room. There were five houses in Clark Street for Aboriginal people.

Narelle: When your talking about the Moora Reserve, do mean like the Moore River Native Settlement, in Mogumber?

Bev: No, the Moore River Native Settlement, that's Mogumber. But Moora Native Reserve, well Moora, Gnowangerup and Collie I think had the largest reserves in the south west of this state.

Narelle: I was just a bit confused, because I have never heard of it before.

Bev: You'd be too young.

Narelle: Yeah, oh I've heard more about Moore River

Bev: Probably the same as Northam, where, like Northam they had the Reserve around.

Narelle: On the outskirts.

Bev: Yeah. Well Moora was something similar to that and they were about three miles south of the town, right where the Hot Rod service is now.

Narelle: Yeah, so you completed up to second year, yes, and from there did you go to work into the community?

Bev: I went to work for Native Welfare as a clerical assistant for three years. Then I left and married and had a family of four - three daughters and a son. Then I continued to work and I saw the amalgamation of the Native Welfare and Community Services. In those days they had the Homemakers service, which was an area that I grew up with. The Homemakers service was a group of women, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal being allocated to many Aboriginal families to work with. You were like the liaison person between the families and all the resources groups in the town. It was just helping these families to adjust from Reserve conditions into Clark Street. From Clark Street, they were allowed to come into the mainstream, with housing. And it was just the duties you used to do: helping them with budgeting, sewing classes, a link between schools, and just helping them to know that they'll have bigger

responsibilities once they come to live in the mainstream, in town. So I did that job for, oh, about nine years and that was all just voluntary work.

Narelle: I'm just trying to work out the period that this all happened, that would have been late 1960s, early 1970s?

Bev: Mm, Yep.

Narelle: And so what did you, from there where did you go? Did you go into a private firm or did you continue to work for a Government Department?

Bev: No, in 1978, having got involved in the Central Midland Aboriginal Progress Association as the Secretary in that year, I worked with the old people from the Reserve. I was just so shocked to think that, you know, they were Aboriginal people, they were still human beings; Government departments had a responsibility, to look after Aboriginal Welfare, if that's what we want to call it. And I just thought that these people were entitled to better housing, better opportunities, than just to be dumped three miles out of town, with no resources. I got together a petition of twenty two signatures, just from all the oldies, and I came down and presented it to the Governor Generals' secretary, at the Government House, in St. Georges Terrace. About half an hour or so, I believe, after the petition was lodged it was sent to Canberra, and then it was placed on the table of Homes West, the Aboriginal Affairs and Community Services then. So those three Government departments were told that they had to pull their resources at the end of the financial year, because there was nothing anyone could do to find a loop hole in the petition. So they just had to act on what we wanted and was requesting - better housing. So those three Governments departments pulled their resources so that there was enough money to be able to buy, eleven I think there were, transportable houses and also to set-up a pensioner unit for the oldies because they said they didn't want to live in town with neighbours that were young people. The people were given the opportunity of Bunnings, ALCOA and McGraths building companies for these transportable homes, so the people had the choice of which type of house they wanted. Once they were told they were eligible for a three bedroom or a four bedroom, they chose the design, the colour scheme and everything that they wanted in their house. As Homemakers, myself and some of the non-Aboriginal people that we had, we used to set up home-maker classes, for sewing, so that the people could make their own curtains and whatever they wanted in the house. So that all happened in that year. So, that was the closing of the Moora Native

Reserve, and I think by that happening, it also prompted the Government departments to look at places like Northam, Gnowangerup and Collie, because they all eventually closed too.

Narelle: So were the people happy with the results that were achieved by this?

Bev: I think they were a bit hesitant to sort of leave the reserve as a security place and just the feeling of not knowing what to expect once they had moved. They even had the choice of where they wanted their houses situated in town and I think it was just that fear of unknown what would happen once they moved.

Narelle: And was it your duty in this association, the Progress Association, as Secretary to try to get them to come and live into these places?

Bev: Well, what happened also was that Community Services pulled enough money from whatever resources they had and they'd got a transportable three bedroom unit or house, brought into town while these other ones were still being made, and then that became the Homemaker Centre and that was the focus point of where Aboriginal people and homemakers can come. We had one or two of the bedrooms set-up like a normal bedroom and it was just an opportunity for these people to come in and experience what it would be like living in their own homes. So there were cooking classes, there were sewing classes and if people just felt that they just wanted to come and sit and have afternoon tea with each other the place was theirs to do what ever they wanted to do with it. It was, you know, one way to getting them feel comfortable, and just having the freedom I suppose of saying you know, one day I'll have a house like this and just gave them the opportunity to look around and see how they wanted to decorate their own homes I suppose.

Narelle: And did you work in Moora for a long time after that?

Bev: Before I left Moora, when the Aboriginal Housing Board of Western Australia was established, I was one of the foundation members from that and I worked for them for about nine years as an Honorary Housing Officer. I left Moora in 1986 and came to Perth to live, so I've been in Perth ever since.

Narelle: So when you were in Moora you worked for the Progress Association for how long?

Bev: I worked for them for thirteen years.

Narelle: And in that thirteen years did you see a lot of changes for Aboriginal people, in terms of labour, within the community? And obviously like housing as well would have changed?

Bev: I eventually became the Administrator to the local group, right up until I resigned in 1986. We had a labour pool, which was run by Aboriginal men, doing maintenance on some of the houses and lawn mowing. Then when Moora was going through the second stage of, I think, the deep sewage programme, we were able to get involved with that. So we brought a truck and employed an Aboriginal person to work for us in that scheme. Then the Roberts Construction was doing the Midlands lines', I think, where they take out old sleepers and put in new sleepers. Well we won a contract with them and we worked seven days of the week around the clock; they gave us an area of what we can cover. During the week we had about twenty two, maybe twenty four men, employed and then on weekends, we'd have up to about thirty or thirty two. That enabled us then to buy another truck, so we had two trucks in our pool, with Aboriginal men working around the clock. That enabled us then to purchase the building where the office is situated now.

This was very successful, cause it sort of gave the men an opportunity to work together, and to know, you know, how to deal with big firms. You had to wire so many sleepers to a pack and then you had to bring them down to what ever Nursery it was in Perth that wanted old second-hand sleepers. So that was the contract that we successfully bid for and got. So we had two trucks on the go bringing sleepers down to what ever, you know, Nursery down here wanted them. So that sort of kept a lot of people occupied. I think now with ATSIC being in place and with the Shire opening up its doors, its giving more Aboriginal men an opportunity of employment, because before there was only just seven or eight of them that used to work for the main roads. And there was only my ex-husband who used to work for the Shire, but now, you know, you've got Aboriginal people on the shire that are driving trucks and are in charge of the maintenance of those truck. Then there's also a pool of people who are work on beautifying the streets; done a lot of work in that area. But there is a lot more

people working in Moora than what there were years ago, because the opportunities have opened up for them.

Narelle: So, were Aboriginal men, at that time, doing a lot shearing, farming still; and were Aboriginal women still working?

Bev: I think there was only myself and my sister and maybe another Aboriginal woman that had sort of full-time jobs and it just wasn't the opportunity of, you know, full employment of Aboriginal women, in the town.

Narelle: Do you find that maybe racism may have played a part in that?

Bev: You know I never sort of experienced it openly, if there were people that had racist sort of attitudes and that, they weren't very vocal, in the town, because we were very vocal in our Aboriginal organisation. From time to time we used to have meetings in the town: open meetings to the Shire, to government people, to politicians, so you know, they knew that if there were something they would say we would defend or otherwise. I think being a very vocal organisation you wouldn't get non-Aboriginal people coming out and being so open in anything that they would want to say.

With the housing, being an Honorary Officer, I used to cover all of the Wheatbelt area, from Moora right across to Merredin, back to Northam, Toodyay and all the area in the Central Midlands. That was the position that I held on the Aboriginal Housing Board and that was the area that I covered. I think the other thing, because I was caught up with a lot of Aboriginal organisations and meetings, here in Perth and when they had the Consultative meetings on, they classified Moora as being a part of the city. So you had to come down to the Perth and bid for money against organisations like the Medical service, the Legal service, the Advancement Council, when it was operating, and the Aboriginal New Era of Fellowship, and all these big organisations. I just felt that the Wheatbelt country towns weren't getting a fair deal. But all us country people we got together, and I said to them that I was going to put a proposal to the table to say that the country, the wheatbelt country people wanted to break away from the city. So anyway they all supported what I was going to do. We put the notion and it was carried. That's how the Wheatbelt Aboriginal Corporation was started. I just thought that our needs were totally different to the needs and aspirations of the city, you know, the city versus country people.

Narelle: And so what year was that when that happened?

Bev: It must have been in the early eighties, because I came down here in '86, so it would have been about '82/83, I just can't remember right off the top of my head. But that was the starting, you know, of us getting together, forming the Wheatbelt Corporation. Because the south, Southern one, SAC (Southern Aboriginal Corporation) was very successful at that time, with its operations. We used to go down to Bunbury and have a look at, you know, how they got things up and running. But now, its quite a successful organisation; its got its nice building in Northam and a lot Aboriginal people working for them.

Narelle: Yeah and I'm one of them. (laughs)

Bev: Yeah (laughs). So I mean I sort of think, you know, even if I am living in the city now, at least I've planted some seeds along the way, you know and these sort of things are there. At least it's giving the country people a voice to say what their needs and aspirations are and you know what future planning they want to do.

Narelle: It seems like you've opened up a lot of doors for Aboriginal people, especially now with, you know, young people having more opportunities, the process, you've sort of helped out in that way.

Bev: Mmm. Another thing that we used have, in Moora - because there used to be an Aboriginal Education Committee, under the guidance of May O'Brien when she used to work in the Ministry of Education, and it used to have people that came from all over the State. We all did voluntary work in those days because there wasn't sitting fees and things like they get today. They had people from all these regions that used to come together and they used to go back and set up Aboriginal Parent Committees. We looked at ourselves in Moora and thought, well we don't want to just set up ourselves as parents for an educational committee and we took a different tack to the other committees. Ours was the only committee in the state where we said, we want teachers on that committee so that when we have meetings we can have them there with us. Because they've got our kids, you know, for seven/eight hours at a day, or what ever it is. We just needed to build bridges with teachers, because you couldn't get your foot in the front door at the High School and because there were about twenty of our Aboriginal kids and they were feeling very out on an limb. So we thought, well, we need to break the barriers down especially with the Principals and Deputy

Principals. We were saying, we are a group of people who are parents and we've got concerns. So we had this committee running in the maybe, mid-seventies, early eighties. Every year we used to plan an Education Seminar. Sometimes we'd have it just on a one day workshop, sometimes two days. This really broke the ice with all the education providers in town because with the Primary school, the Convent school, the High school, and the Kindy and the Playgroup, we had each of those providers represented on our committee, with about six Aboriginal parents. We asked for things like, an Aboriginal to be employed, based at the Senior High School because it's the only High School between Perth and Geraldton and we wanted Aboriginal people to be employed in the Catholic system. So with all the bureaucracy and how governments work, it takes 10 years for a programme to be put on their books. But I look back now and think well that's another thing to think that, you know, it's there, we've got the superintendent office based in Moora, and an Aboriginal Liaison Officer attached to that office who works in the whole of the Wheatbelt region. My daughter is the Aboriginal Education Worker at the Senior High School, the St Josephs Convent has got three Aboriginal people employed there, so I mean, its gone in leaps and bounds in that little area. I don't feel too guilty coming away and living in Perth now because I think, well, I was part and parcel of fighting for things for our people and they are working so I feel good about that.

Narelle: Sounds like it was very successful. From there, I presume you went on to work for the Catholic schools because you mentioned that.

Bev: Yeah I've been there for two and a half years here in Perth. When I first came down to Perth I couldn't get a job anywhere and then eventually was told that there was a Liaison Promotional Officer situated at what is now Edith Cowan University. I applied for that and got that position, and worked there for three years right up until it became a university. The position disbanded because they separated the Department of Aboriginal and Intercultural studies into two sections, so I suppose they couldn't work out what they wanted to do with that position. Anyhow, eventually they just didn't see a need for it and so that was my first job in the city and then, a couple of months after that I was asked if I wanted a job in Catholic Education Commission so I've been there for two and a half years.

Narelle: So are you involved in any unions and if you are do you get a voice from your involvement with a union.

Bev: Well, I went along to one union, the one up here in Roberts Street because there was a person there who came up and did a workshop last year at Catholic Education. But when I went and asked about where do we fit in I wasn't able to get a clear answer from them. As for unions, I mean, I'd gladly join the union if I knew which one was the right one. Catholic Education is independent and I think that's the reason why they sort of find that.

Narelle: Now that you are working with Catholic Education, do you find that racism plays a part, that racism comes in?

Bev: I find their attitudes are very racist, I don't know whether they realise it, it could be through their own ignorance. The difficulties that I've experienced this year have really left me questioning my value and where I want to go with my faith or journey, if I want to put it that way. As an Aboriginal person brought up outside the system and with the teaching from the Catholic Church you think that's all fine but once you get into a system and work from inside it can be a real culture shock.

Narelle: Do you find that working for Catholic Education is different to working with the committees that you formed in Moora?

Bev: Well at least it gave us a voice, and the responsibilities to make decisions for ourselves as Aboriginal people. But in Catholic Education that same flexibility and responsibility aren't there because of the bureaucracy of how the office is set up. I call it this mission dictatorship our parents grew up with, whether they were put in missions or not when they were young but from the church point of view where you always had the religious telling the Aboriginal people how to behave and how not to behave. I mean that happened in the 40' and 50's and we're here in the 1990's and I find that still here today.

Narelle: Did you find what you have achieved throughout your life so far that you have been there's been a lot of support from family, the community and friends?

Bev: Well I suppose what really turned my life around when I was in Moora was when I heard it being said 'oh the family are a nice family *but* they are Aboriginals'. I thought about it for a few days and then I thought well if that's how they think of people well, I thought, every opportunity I get whether I'm talking to a group of parents or a group of school kids or talking to whoever,

Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal I will do whatever I can to encourage, and even if it's only to encourage one student it would be a success. We are Gods creations regardless of what church we belong to and if this is what we are created as Aboriginal people well then lets walk this earth and just be proud of the fact that we are Aboriginal.

Its our right as the Indigenous people of this country to have an education and nobody can deny us that. I mean, why should we feel ashamed anymore? I think if we can feel really good about ourselves and coming from within our hearts and saying, well I'm proud to be Aboriginal, well we can say the prejudice, the racism out there, that's somebody else's problem not ours. The worse thing we can do is fall into the trap that white people want Nyoongars to fall into sometimes. So I think every opportunity I get I will tell people that!

Narelle: How has your Aboriginality and your family helped you throughout your life?

Bev: Well I suppose, in our life our family structure, I suppose Mum always wore the pants in our family. Whatever she said went, and Dad always supported her whether he disagreed with her. He'd never tell her that he disagreed he'd always support her. I suppose my other sister in Moora and particularly two of the brothers have been supportive in what I've done. There are non-Aboriginal people who have been supportive and good friends. It doesn't matter what you do in life you have to go out there and plant the seed for a network of support people in your community. There are a lot of people I admire in the Aboriginal community and you know they would support issues that we believe. It's not easy being an Aboriginal, we only know that all too well. We've got a bit up there and we can work for it, if we don't nobody else will.

Narelle: I guess that's one of the reasons why I'm going here to Uni and wanting to make things for myself because I eventually want to get into journalism. Doing this is a bit of experience for myself.

Bev: Good one!

Narelle: I guess its really good to see yourself being used as a role model for younger people. Your daughter who is a AEW she would be a role model as well. My role model is my mother.

Bev: I wish my kids were able to have their grandmother because I believe that grandmothers have been the backbone of our society. My mother was a no nonsense women, even when she was working at the hospital in Moora - she was working at the laundry and then in the kitchen as a kitchen maid. I can remember going to work with her and when we got to the hospital - they had the back verandah as a sleepout, and when we walked in there, the top part of the mattress was saturated with rain 'cos it was in the wintertime and Mum's sister in law was sitting down the bottom end of the bed and she was a very fair person and she was just about blue with the cold and the little iron cribs that they used to have then was the only thing that wasn't wet because she had it in the corner so it wouldn't get wet. Anyhow, when mum saw that she just about had a fit so she took it to, in those days it used to be the Native Welfare Advancement Council and anyhow all the religious people, Catholic Priest, Anglican Priest and Methodist along with the two white farmers, one was the Chairperson and the other was the Secretary, and then you had about six or eight Aboriginal people who were members of that committee and Mum was one of them. She took it that committee and complained about the treatment of her sister-in law at the hospital. In those days you had to go to the hospital for outpatients where the doctor saw you. So a couple of days later mum went up with one of my brothers and when the old doctor arrived at the surgery he just said to her, 'I want you in here Pearl; I want to see you right now!' Then she went to see what he wanted he flung the local paper, The Moora Advocate, and of course on the front cover was this big write up of Mum complaining to this committee about the treatment of her sister. Anyhow, the old doctor went right off his brain and him and Mum ended up having an argument there in front of everybody and so he told her to get out of the hospital and he didn't want to treat her kids and she said that was fine by her. Mum was under one of the professors of Medicine at RPH then, she had a heart condition and she said if you don't want to treat my children, well, when I go back to RPH I'll be making a complaint about you down there she said to see what I can get down. She walked out of the hospital then, with my brother and that old doctor must have realised what she was going to do so he went running after her down the street and brought her back. But just because of mum putting that to the committee and it got into the papers, it really challenged the hospital then. So they closed that ward down and the first Aboriginal 'mid' patient was admitted because it had a big four bed maternity ward and there was no one in the ward when Auntie Mena was there. After that, the first Aboriginal women that had a baby in there was a full blood women and she was the first Aboriginal patient to be put into a main ward.

Mum, she wouldn't think twice. If she believed in her heart that she had to do something or say something, she would. I suppose looking at her she was a very, very strong Catholic in what she believed in so I suppose we sort of followed in her footsteps too.

Narelle: What about your Dad

Bev: My Dad was a returned soldier. He went over to the Middle-East during the Second World War and fought over there and North Africa. I don't know whether he made it to Jerusalem or not, but near to Jerusalem for three years, and then he came back and went to New Guinea for about 18 months up there; so he was twenty three when he joined up. When he came home he married mum at the age of thirty and she was about twenty three. But they were always independent, Mum particularly. Out of the two families, Mum would have been the only one that didn't drink or smoke and there were ten children in grandmother's family. So I suppose in one way I think that was a blessing because we were not brought up with alcohol and that. But dad was always a farm worker so when he came back from the war he continued to work on farms. The last farm he worked on, he was on that property for nineteen years, so he's retired now. He has just turned seventy seven this year, so his age and his health is catching up with him, but at least we've still got him with us I suppose.

LORNA LITTLE

* Interviewed by Amanda Bell

Lorna Little, a Yamadgi woman was born in Meekatharra. Lorna has a Bachelor of Arts (Social Science) from Curtin University and has been studying in the M. Phil. (Australian Studies) at the University of Western Australia.

Mum and Dad were part of the scene when the Native Welfare Department had complete control over Aboriginal movements, they went up there to work, so he was working on the station up there, and mum too so that was the reason why I was born up there.

Some of the family, about 4 or 5 of them, I think, three sisters ; Viv Rose and June and two brothers were born at Mogumber, Moore River Native Settlement and the rest were born at Pinjarra. There were 10 kids in my family.

Dad was working as the station hand, working on the windmills, with the stock, with the machinery, namely motorbike and sidecar. But it was mainly working with stock. Mum was cooking and doing housework, that's what they were doing when they got married, that was part of the work programme that was set by Neville I think, for Aboriginal people at that particular time. Well, Mum and Dad went through that training process and so they were among the workers of the Aboriginal young people.

The history shows they didn't have any control over their life. The work represented a certain amount of respite, if you like, or leave from the settlement, the dreariness of the Moore River Native Settlement and so they were able to, because of their ability as good, competent and responsible workers, they were given an opportunity to be placed among the white farmers and station owners or even people in the metropolitan area. I know mum worked for a few Perth families around this area

* Amanda Bell is a Coordinator at the Centre for Aboriginal Programmes, University of Western Australia

Childhood experience/ family experience of work

It was a way of life, Mum and Dad were very hard working people and those days you didn't have Social Security and endowment until just after , or during the war, or just after Mum and Dad got out of the mission. A lot of people were released during the war years you see, and because they could read and write and were educated as well as being hard working, they had a good reputation among the Native Welfare Department staff as well as the people they worked for when they were single. But when the work run out they had no other recourse but to go back to the settlement, you know, so they weren't set apart in that respect. The benefits flowed much more to the white people than it did to Mum and Dad 'cos they both earned money . The structure in those was, um, records show that she earned 7 and 6, you know, you start off with 5 shillings and then 7 & 6 and then 10 shillings. When she first started off she had 2 & 6 for pocket money and 2 & 6 was kept back for expenses and to be banked for her. Dad likewise, so that by they time they finished there, Mum had some money with the Department. , I didn't know whether she collected it or not. Dad also, the records show that he had about 20 pounds, which was quite a substantial amount in those days because the situation at the time, you know the great depression, there was no money around.

In those days Dad had to write down and beg and plead for his money and he didn't always get it. I think in the fifties he got some money back but the records show the correspondence between the Department down in Perth and the settlement, the Moore River Native Settlement superintendent I guess. It states in one the correspondence there that they were reluctant to break into that 30 pounds because it was, what do you call it, put into bonds for him or banked for him. It was a lump sum anyway and during the war we lived in dire poverty. If it wasn't for bush tucker we would not have survived, because times were really hard and you had to have money to survive to buy your flour and that, and things were difficult. I mean you had to be out of town by dark, you were not allowed in town and you had to have money on your person to show that you had a legitimate reason for going there, in that you were doing shopping and things. I know there were times there that we had next to nothing, living on the smell of an oily rag, yet Dad had that money there and he didn't get the last of that until the fifties. The Department didn't tell him that he had the money there and yet we were really hard pressed for money and things were so difficult. If you didn't have work, you didn't eat, thank God for bushtucker. But of course that's all destroyed, you had to go further and further out for bushtucker . It was

very difficult because of the laws governing the permits for going into town and being out by dark and being apprehended by the police and going in jail. They did that to plenty of them, the men were put into Fremantle and the women and children taken to Moore River. You were questioned on the streets, late afternoon and early evening, the police would come over and question what you were doing in town. That hung around until after the war because when the Aboriginal servicemen came back and they objected to it.

Uncle Richard was in the army, I don't know whether he saw active service, but he certainly was in uniform and everything. I think he went to the Eastern states but the fact is, not only him but there were other Aboriginal young people from the Moore River Native Settlement there, and they knew them when they came back and when they still had to be off the streets. There were many many fights down in Pinjarra They had to stand up for their rights. To say they were okay to be called up to put their life on the line for their country and when they came back they were treated like dirt, they objected to that. They went to the police and it was there in the courts. Even that wasn't given good grace because there was conditions, and those conditions imposed a burden of hardship on Aboriginal people of the emotional kind. You had to deny your parents or your extended family some of them even their mothers and grandmothers. They weren't allowed to go on the reserves to mix with them, impossible conditions were placed on us, an unconscionable burden of hardship placed on Aboriginal people to keep their family connections. I don't think that was placed on any other people in this country. If you broke those rules just for wanting to see your parents , or grandparents, or brothers and sisters Christmas and birthdays and get together like that, you were put in jail for that. That was seen as an infringement of the Wadjula law and because they made Aboriginal people British subjects, they were subject to British law. Any infringement, and even if this was not an aspect that was taken in account, that was a weapon that was used to get Aboriginal people in order to justify them being locked away.

There were times when Dad didn't get paid, if the boss came back late on a Friday so we couldn't do our shopping on a Friday afternoon or Saturday morning, then we had nothing, only bushtucker to live on and depending on the season, sometimes it was pretty hard. You couldn't go hunting unless you went right out because you would be trespassing. It was very, very difficult but you know, I think because we had Mum and Dad it was bearable. Because we had the parents and we had our identity I guess, moulded by them and kept intact, we were proud of that.

Education was, of course always held to be very important by Mum and Dad and this is another instance of unconscionable hardship imposed. During the war when we left the Moore River Native Settlement I didn't even know there was such a thing as racism, really but they didn't want the Aboriginal people in the schools, so we were belted on the schools, you know, while we were at the school, punished by the teachers in the classroom, belted by the kids in the school grounds. Those of us who caught the bus, because Dad worked on the farm, we were belted on the buses and this was morning and afternoon, 5 days a week of this terrible punishment that was meted out. There wasn't a day that we didn't get punished,. Sometimes we'd get the whole three together, other times you'd fall foul of the teacher or if everything was alright in the classroom you'd fall foul of the kids going home after school or on the school ground.

To me, school and getting an education was a very painful thing but the other side of that was if we didn't go to school we were taken away. The authorities would have the law, the legal right to come and take you and they were ready to pounce on any families, any children because there was money given to the institutions to look after the children. So there was times when I refused to go to school and would have gladly stayed away. We did play truant a heck of a lot of the time, but the fact is that Mum would beg and plead us to go school because we'd be taken away. We had to really knuckle down and take our punishment just for getting an education and just for the right to stay together. Hardship was placed on us, our lives fraught with such terror everyday, every school day, and then weekends when we had to come in for your stores that was the fraught with the terror of maybe Dad getting taken away because we were on the streets. The shops didn't always open, they opened until 12 o'clock on a Saturday and on a Sunday they didn't open at all. But if you were caught in town, somehow if you couldn't get back or whatever, it didn't matter.

But as for working, when I turned 14, I only went to school until I was 10 /11. I got Rhematic Fever and I couldn't go back to school, the Doctor said that I had to have correspondence course. Well, I couldn't walk, Aboriginal people lived miles out of town and the reserve was quite a walk away, the Doctor said no-way. So I couldn't walk to school and then we would have to leave early and you would have to jog to get there by half past eight or whenever they started. So I left off school by fifth grade, I think, fourth or fifth grade. I didn't see it through and I was doing OK until I got Rheumatic Fever and then when I came back from Princess Margaret, I nearly died with it. I stayed home of course, I had the usual bone aches etc.

Amanda: How did you feel about that, were you happy to be away from school and be at home? Not really, I was too sick to cope with it in the first instance when I was in hospital and then when I went home, I was glad to get home but I wasn't allowed to walk big distances, I wasn't allowed to swim. I wasn't allowed to run free and wild in the bush like the rest of them. The other younger brothers and sisters were coming up and getting an education and talking and really learning to talk and speak and write and that. I just had the very basics, so I felt really left out, a typical, typical Aboriginal person. I would hang my head because I couldn't read or write as well as the others, it is a very inhibiting experience. You don't have the knowledge, you don't have the expertise and when I was 14, I had to go to work.

Amanda: Was that something that your parents wanted you to do or something you just had to do? They were anxious of course. If I didn't go to work I would be put in a home, that was part of the conditions that the authorities imposed and so I couldn't stay back home. I had to get out and work and again, this was my first taste of work as a domestic in a private home and because Mum had a good reputation and she was a good worker, the Wadjulas, they were prepared to give me a chance you see. So with Mums encouragement, because if I didn't work I would have got 'taken away'. There was no doubt about that!

Dad was on the PWD by this time, that was good, once a fortnight the wages was good but it was in between times (middle week). Because he was working away, we were in Pinjarra, but Dad was working in Mundijong, Yarloop, Harvey digging drains you see and so when he got paid, he would be out there (one of those places) then he would come home for the weekend. It wasn't all the time, it was just the sections of the drains had to be dug at certain times. They moved the camp around. If they did the south section, then Dad was down at Yarloop and Harvey, Waroona - if they did the northern section he was up at Mundijong, North Dandelup, and all around there. If we were lucky he would be in Pinjarra and Mandurah's just down the track, North Dandalup was just up the track and Coolup wasn't too far, so that would be in just a day's trek see. But when it was the north and south, well, that was to bad,. We didn't have money and I had to go to work, because by this time Mum and Dad had bought a block of land and what with the rates and taxes and food for the kids - Mum got the endowment of course, but this all helped to pay off this block of land so we didn't have much at all and I had to go to work.

Amanda: Was your older sister at this time out at work? Yes she was working too and between us we helped to give Mum a few bob to tied us over 'til Dad came home with the pay to stock up with food and things, clothes, Christmas time. But it was pretty difficult, and I guess when June got older she became more independent.

Mum knew what she was on about. Under Mum's guidance I guess, we learnt to do a good days work. I can remember at 14 working from seven in the morning, get up at six and walk I don't know how many miles it used to be, to get down there and scrub the floors before the shop opened at seven. Six to seven, I was scrubbing the floors and cleaning the shop. After that, the washing, and it wasn't washing machines in those days, it was a copper and fire and you had to starch the things and glue the things and hang them out, and once they dried you had to damp them down and iron them. So I wouldn't get home until dark. From seven until seven working just for about 15 shillings, sometimes a dollar (10 shillings) depending on the how much I did. I would probably get about 5 shillings for the washing, 5 shillings for ironing and 5 shillings for all the floors and that was a full days work. I would just be about dead on my feet by the time I would get home, and I used to suffer because my bones used to ache and I would get the strep in my throat and I would be really sick. Well that was summer time and winter time of course, the swamp were we lived, used to fill up with water.....I'm a tough old bird, I survived...Gods got a plan for me I'll tell ya....

Amanda: What was the conditions with your employer....Do you consider they were good to you? I suppose it was 'exploitation' if you looked at it coldly and clinically. To me, I was getting money, things were cheap then and so I was able to stretch that. Say it was 10 shillings I got, well then there were many things I would buy, like a piece of mutton shank, neck or flap, dripping and if I didn't buy bread I'd buy flour and some sugar, maybe milk (tin milk) and vegetables. So you would stretch it out and it was good, and plus I would have a good feed myself. I was skinny as a rack, couldn't put the fat on working but I had a cruel feed. It was many, many months or years maybe afterwards when you got established down there and the people knew we were trustworthy I suppose, and so the shopkeepers used to let us put a lay by on things, that is how I used to buy my clothes; 2 '6 here, 5 shillings there, a little bit I would put down. We would go to the movies, they used to have movies in those days, Phantom of the Opera, I couldn't pronounce Phantom. Mum and the old people would say Ph is pronounced F , gee these Wadjulas are funny people , could you say it was a F sound when there is a Ph? I used to say Pantom you knowtalk about funny.

Movies like that, they used to have them in the open air, and that use to be quite an event for Aboriginal people. Mind you, we would trip down to the front, where we would all have our own special seats down set aside for Aboriginal people way down the front. I suppose it was good, couldn't complain, they let us in to have that bit of entertainment, so you had to be thankful for small mercies... I think what tempered that was the money. The fact that Aboriginal people were consumers just started to penetrate white consciousness, they did have money to spend and bums on seats meant money in the pocket sort of thing...So it wasn't lost on them **Amanda: We won't let them sit with us, but I mean we will get some money out of them or put them up the front ...Yes, that's right Amanda: And hope they will behave themselves or something...Yes, and we had to because police would be there.**

After that I was happy as I got a good reputation for doing housework. I was thorough and did my work well and trustworthy too I guess that stood for a lot. I mean I worked to the point where I had a very good reputation as a cleaner, I worked for Lady MacLarty when her husband was Premier, used to go down there and cook and clean and that for her and she was lovely.

But then there was problems when they bought the migrants out because there were many a fights in the streets. Jobs became scarce again, yeh, really interesting, from my own experiences in working in the fact that it was just casual work I suppose, the men had the seasonal work and in between times, they would go out. I can remember droves of Aboriginal people going down to Waroona, Harvey, Benger, Roelands spud digging - and coming back, they were boom times for money. We used to pick up the rejects, so we got about a shilling or two shillings it would depend you know. Some of them I can remember used to put a lot of sand in the bottom you know, of course the old boss came along and tipped the bag up and you had all your potatoes and some sand and of course that made the sand go down when he put it back and he'd say well you top that up and you'll get your money and if you don't, well, you'd get less so you had to do that.

When I came up this way um, what happened was, June made the break first, she came up to Perth, she got a job at the Home of Peace in Subiaco and she worked in the hospital there as a Nursing Aid, I guess and she did night school so she worked her way her nursing studies, she did it like that. she wanted me to come up but because I'd had this rhematic fever Mum said no, Viv and Rose had come up to, they finished there schooling down at Pinjarra and at that time the Native

Welfare Department had these hostels in Perth so they took the children to Hostels, Alvin House and MacDonald House were the two hostels for Aboriginal children, so the girls went there, Viv and Rose that is, to up the ante on their education. Viv, she passed her junior subjects, she did Nursing she got into the intake and she started her Nursing Training. June by this time, had already gone over to Royal Perth and was doing her training.

By this time I was old enough to do my own thing and I started to stand on my own two feet. I made friends with some church people and they would come around, they were interested in doing some missionary work among the Aboriginal people there, and there was great suspicion. But this lady I used to work for, they owned the shop and it just so happened that when I left the housework position, her husband lost 10 shillings and I got the blame for taking it and I didn't, it had fallen behind the chair and they found it after, but in the meantime the suspicion had fallen on me and I felt bad about it. My girlfriend was working at the shop but wanted to leave so I took the job. If that hadn't have happened I wouldn't have left the domestic work because it was a good job because I got paid cash and in kind. But this thing happened and so I saw the lady in the shop and I left the domestic work and I worked in the shop where I was getting more money. My new boss gradually drew me out, because I wasn't one for talking, and she asked me what I would like to do and I was saying I would like to get a better education. I was feeling a bit bad about the fact that my sisters had come away and doing well up in Perth and were using such big words and oh I thought they were terrific 'cos they could do sums and they could speak and they knew what those words meant. Here was me, if people spoke to me I would just drop my eyes and put my foot in the ground. I really was ignorant! Honest to God! I just felt so intimidated by their knowledge and rolling my tongue around some of these big words I invariably got it wrong, pronunciation as well as meaning.

I was a good worker and if I was really wanting to further my education my new boss would help me get into college up there in Bickley. So I worked my way through the Seventh Day Adventist College, Carmel College. I worked, I tell you what, I burnt that midnight oil and I sat up and I studied and I really got good marks. I surprised myself. Mind you there was a lot of prayer that went into that and I think God does reward you if you show effort or initiative. We were supposed to settle down about ten I suppose well as soon as all the lights were out, we would study by pilot light. I don't know how many times I sat up to 2.00-3.00 am in the morning, then I would get up at 5.30 am and light the fires and get

breakfast up as my duties to help pay for my tuition. So I was cooks assistant, and boy I was glad for my mum and those ladies for showing me how to do that, you know, yeh cos that helped me to work my way through college

Amanda: So you were staying in dorms in the college and working at the same time? Yeh, I was terrified and I was homesick and when I first went there, some of the Wadjula kids who had come from the Eastern States had never ever interacted with Aboriginal people, some of the kids that come from this state had never interacted with Aboriginal people and they were as terrified as I was. They expected me to have, I suppose, fierce looks and be savage and go round with next to nothing on!

Not all the students worked there, but there were a lot of students who worked to pay for their tuition. Those who had the money and influence had everything paid for them but each student had to do some chores as part of the overall rules of the college. For us, those of us who had to really work it was a matter of getting your tuition fees and I had to work summer time holidays. For me it was quite an experience that's why I value my education, the government didn't pay for me then.

I passed the State Nurses Entrance in WA and the State Nurses Entrance in NSW because I wanted to go over there, to work at the Seventh Day Adventist private hospital where it was a requirement to pass the state entrance exams. When I got down here, mum, again she didn't want me to go to Sydney and I had my passage booked to go with my friends and I was in the first lot selected because of my good marks. I got excellent marks as I say I burnt that midnight oil, I did other activities,

After I did that, and I passed those two bloody state entrances I got down to Royal Perth and Matron said *no way* **Amanda: Why?** I don't know..... because I was Aboriginal. Viv and June had left and of course when I got there matron said no, you can serve out your time as a nurses aid, I said I can't be responsible for other people, I know that I got the marks. I mean we came to sit the tests in the Terrace, a whole mob of us, and I got better marks than some of those Wadjula girls and here was matron knocked me back and I had to put on a yellow uniform. those Wadjula girls they were taken on as probationary students and they'd say what are you doing in that uniform, you got better marks than we did. I was too shame to tell them what matron's reasons were, but the only thing that I could think of was that I was Aboriginal.

I walked all over Perth, I went to King Edward, Fremantle, Princess Margaret, to find, so that I could do the training properly as a nurse instead of a nursing aid and I couldn't get in anywhere, the doors closed and I was just not even considered. I was very deflated by that so that by the time I never even finished my nursing aid training, I got to, I think I had a month left to go, but by this time I had met Horrie so I thought stuff it! I'm taking myself right out of this white world, because they don't give you a fair go, so I took off. I genuinely loved Horrie, we were given away, up at settlement, Noongar way, true as God, and we met and fell in love and got married. I just wanted to get out of the white world and get back down there. But those skills weren't lost, I mean they stood me in good stead to rear my children.

I got involved with the Wanderers down there, the Pinjarra Wanderers Aboriginal club, so I've always been involved with the Aboriginal community. I was secretary for the club, Dad was President and Uncle Steve was the Treasurer and so I used to help with all the arranging and writing and the letters, me and Uncle Steve used to do that, dad used to check everything so it was useful even tho all that didn't go to waste. Then after I got married, Horrie and I still were involved, using the skills. All those long hours when I was 14, stood me in good stead because the hours in nursing were long, making up beds, emptying pans, looking after the patients comfort, urine testing, I was beginning to give needles, went Shenton Park for a stint. Taking out sutures, taking blood pressure, all that was good went I went back to Pinjarra because sometimes those fellas would drink and fight and sustain some terrible injuries and they wouldn't go down to the doctor, they wouldn't treat'em you know at the hospital, they didn't want them. Cos I know when I was sick with rhematic fever, they put me out on the bloody cold verandah and in those days it was a building like this, just with asbestos and wire netting and blinds and all the old consumptive old blokes were out there, men and this little black chicken out there with rhematic fever. They didn't really care for you, you know. I was an afterthought I think, when they had a spare minute and that was it. When I cut my toe they stitched it up without any anaesthetic, I nearly blacked out. But they were pretty harsh times for Aboriginal people, They didn't care, I think the mentality was that they were not quite human. Anyway, I survived.

I later worked for Community Health, all that education came in handy plus the nursing background was good in that I could take temperatures and stuff, I had a lot of common sense as well and so I got a job with Community Health. This was after the kids. Horrie, my husband had left the railways and was getting

seasonal work. The railways was OK for money, so when Horrie left I had to go out and find work, and Horrie liked to drink and smoke at this time so I went off cutting bean sticks and tomato and cray sticks by myself. I learnt the measurement, cray sticks were tall and thin, tomato sticks were larger and heavier. I'd cut them up myself, tie them into bundles and cart them out of the swamp to feed me and the kids. We'd leave the car a long way away, walk through the swamp and I tell you what, the sticks were bloody heavy! If you found a good patch you'd go to work with a tommy axe. You would get one dollar for each bundle, 25 sticks in each bundle. It was hard work and I'd always come home tired. It wasn't straightforward, sometimes you'd have to fight your way out of the swamp, but one good thing, God showed mercy -there were no snakes.

I was also carting hay with Horrie, and Tom, my boy would help. Horrie had a fencing contract, I'd drive the tractor. At one stage, when Horrie was sick I'd do it by myself, You had to dig a hole for the fence, drill holes and thread the wire through.

After all this I went back to housework, which was good, it helped me buy a fridge. I'd take so much money out of my wages and between me and Horrie we brought the fridge. We had a reputation as hard workers, we were clean and we were part of the community.

Later on I did a Liaison Officers Course at WAIT and went on to do the Aboriginal Bridging Course at WAIT, a course I had earlier pushed with others to be set up. I did that in 1978 and in 79 I started Social Work but wasn't crash hot on Psychology.

Horrie died at the end of 1979 and I got so sick and sad. After the funeral I remember falling on the lounge and dragging myself along, but it wasn't my time to go. I've got to stick around to see the rest of my grannies! There were some good times and some bad times but I reckon it all balances out. I worked bloody hard, it's about time I stopped I think!

GRANDFATHER NYOONGAH

Graeme Dixon *

I remember my Grannie
with fondness and love
respect and gratitude
for that which was given
without demanding expectation
of a thing in return
and I solemnly believe
any strength I possess
was given by he
who possessed so much
he could afford to be
generous to those
who carry forth his seed

I remember the confidence
in every step he trod
as we set out
through the crispy ice frost
of early southern mourns
that sliced at my ears
like a cold scalpel cut
which never seemed to bother
this proud man that strode
through the length of each day
faster than a boys legs
could ever hope to run

I remember the way
he spat into calloused hands
planting parted feet
like deep roots in the sand
Then the rhythmic sway
of hips and torso
as rippling arms
swung the steely blade
towards the sturdy flesh
of now skeletal trees
Once friend, now foe
due to the unquenchable lust
of dispossessors, who possessed
the right of might
within the power of the oppressor

But I can remember, how after
he caressed the moist flesh
of the fallen
sighing gently with respect
of once mighty, tall
now lying sprawlen
prone in the clay
bloody sap oozing
from gaping wounds inflicted
"Crying bloody shame!"

he would mutter
in a tone matter factly
belying the unspoken emotion
that spilt from his eyes

I remember the stories
dripping like wild honey
from soft spoken lips
enclouded in smoke and steam
of hot, sweet tea he sipped
and the half cigarette
forever teetering from the rim
of his mouth, seeming
a permanent part
of a face, stone smooth
yet rugged
like the landscape surrounding
which he, and his brothers
had cleared and fenced
for a pittance, by those
who later denied
their very existence

I remember how
he would cup gnarled fingers
over the flashing flame
restoking his smoke
face collapsing with inhalation
then exhaling through flared nostrils
as his story began again
Moist eyes slanted
over nicotine stinging pupils
which sought refuge from the mist
surrounding
each work uttered
like a mystical
dream
For my childish imagination
as a dream
it all seemed.
I remember his tales
of root-picking
on icy Autumn mornings
and stacks of burning mallee
glowing crimson in the night
Red beacons in inky blackness
that beckoned frozen fingers
to be kissed by it's warmth
And the tranquil contentment
of a hard days yakka
tinged with resentment
of being a conspiritor, allied
with an alien culture

that placed worth and value
before land
and life.

I remember the dregs
of old cold campfires
lying beside overgrown tracks
long forgotten, but still alive
with the spirits of ancestors
who once trekked virgin earth
Avoiding towns, and protectors
who protected nought
but "self" from "other"
that other being theirs
Those with hard, cold eyes
gazing into the distance
never seeing the beauty, near
nor feeling the spirituality
of timeless eternity
awaken brutally
from the Dreamings innocence
when the Nightmare of ignorance
was born
I remember, so well
yet sometimes it seems
History had forgotten
the sweat, and the blood that flowed
from open pores
and broken blisters
of Nyoongah grandfather
Grandmother
who toiled side by side
for the fathers and sons
who possessed the land
that never could they own
nor ever understand

Apart from
not a part of
Like tormented Ghosts
in a derelict graveyard
desiring a paradise, lost
doomed
to an eternal damnation
of a being, bitter
devoid
of lifes sweet
essence.

* Graeme Dixon is a Nyoongar poet and author. He was the inaugural winner of the David Unaipon Award in 1990 and a collection of his poems were published entitled "Holocaust Island". Graeme is currently working on a novel based on his family and writing a play with Aboriginal writer, Archie Weller.

The Royal Commission on the Condition of Natives in regard to Aboriginal labour in the north of Western Australia in 1904.

Sandra Harben*

Since the invasion of Aboriginal lands, the indigenous people of Western Australia have been the subject of much debate. Central to this debate has been the Aboriginal 'problem'. From the invaders perspective Aboriginal people were seen as presenting social problems so complex that politicians and administrators reached wherever possible for the "...'too hard' basket".¹ They also tried to find ways of dealing with the 'problem' by variously taming, exploiting, controlling, protecting, preserving, breeding out and assimilating the Aboriginal people concerned. Though the colony which was to become Western Australia had only been established in 1829, by the 1840's Aboriginal people had been under investigation by governments and other 'independent' experts to discover how best to deal with the Aboriginal 'problem'. One such investigation was the the Royal Commission on the Condition of Natives conducted in 1904 by Walter Edmund Roth on behalf of the Western Australian Government. This was to become an important element in the 'Aboriginal' debate and in finding and enacting legislative 'solutions' to the 'problem'.

The Roth Royal Commission was to investigate and report on issues such as the administration of the Aborigines Department, the Employment of Aboriginal Natives under Contracts of Service and Indentures of Apprenticeship and the Employment of Aboriginal Natives in the Pearl-Shell Fishery and Otherwise on Boats. In formalising some of the outcomes of the Royal Commission, the government subsequently passed legislation, the Aborigines Act (1905), specifically pertaining to the Aboriginal 'problem' of Western Australia. Though it was claimed that the 1905 Act was designed to cater for the 'protection' of Aboriginal people particularly in regard to labour, it became a further element in the suppression of Aboriginal rights and the exploitation of their labour. This paper will focus on the employment of Aboriginal labour in the north of

* Sandra Harben has a long employment history, much of which has been involved with the Perth Aboriginal community. Although her Nyoongar family are originally from Brookton, Sandra grew up in Perth. Sandra is currently studying for a Bachelor of Arts at the University of Western Australia majoring in Industrial Relations and Geography.

Western Australia and show how the Royal Commission failed to address the issue of exploitation of Aboriginal workers in any concrete manner.

In order to examine the Royal Commissions findings and its response to the exploitation of Aboriginal labour in the north, it is important to understand the broader social and economic forces impacting on the role of Aboriginal labour. The north of Western Australia was one of the last areas to be opened up to colonial expansion. Glowing reports from Alexander Forrest in 1879 led to much land being taken up in the form of pastoral leases.² These leasehold agreements provided for the Aboriginal people to continue to hunt on pastoral runs. However many lessees ignored these obligations; they herded their stock around waterholes, used pastures for cattle, destroyed game and killed Aboriginal hunting dogs.³ As a result much of the Aboriginal land was degraded and water sources were fouled.

Colonisation meant Aboriginal people were denied their land and livelihood. Traditional Aboriginal people lived a nomadic existence with a strong affinity to the land. Their social organisation was based on a hunter and gatherer economy, which called for small groups, able to congregate or disperse quickly and easily according to the dictates of food supply, season and ceremony. Traditional law and kinship systems regulated social conduct and mutual obligation provided a firm basis for survival. The encroachment of European settlement led to the denial of access to land and livelihood for Aboriginal people and ultimately displacement to a dependant existence on pastoral stations, ration depots and missions with massive disruption to culture and family. The result was extreme poverty as well as physical, social and psychological deprivation.

When their land was expropriated, Aboriginal people had no alternative economic base and the imposed society with its foreign structures provided a poor alternative to Aboriginal society. Fences used to divide land by pastoralists and land owners pushed Aboriginal people to the fringes of country towns and settlements. Without land, Aboriginal people could not collect food in the traditional way and became dependant on the white society for work or charity for their survival.

Throughout the north, most of the Aboriginal people who had survived the initial contact of white civilisation chose the option which A.P. Elkin controversially termed 'Intelligent parasitism'.⁴ This involved Aboriginal men and women being 'employed' without wages on sheep and cattle stations. In

return for their unpaid labour, the Aboriginal 'workers' and their dependants received food, clothing, tobacco, and other basic necessities. While a distinction was commonly made between 'workers' and their 'dependants' it essentially became in practice an arbitrary distinction between those who may be paid for their work, and those who may be called on to work for nothing. The exploitation of Aboriginal labour became widespread and generations of 'workers' and 'dependants' were subjected to the whims and economic decisions of managers.⁵ Thus Aboriginal people came to form the main nucleus of the labour force in the north of Western Australia. The government supported the distinction between 'workers' and 'dependants' and the exploitation of Aboriginal labour by recommending Aborigines to pastoralists, for "on the whole, (they) make very excellent station hands, and their labour is practically obtained for nothing".⁶

The poor working and living conditions for Aborigines in the north of Western Australia forced them into conditions of mendicant dependency. Aboriginal people who were employed by whites rarely gained recognition in any material way. None were paid full wages, many were fortunate if they received any cash at all and almost all lived in appalling conditions as well as being subject to physical abuse.⁷ Thus Aboriginal people laboured under conditions likened to 'slavery'.⁸

This is not to say that Aboriginal people submitted to this enforced lifestyle quietly. In response to the desecration and appropriation of their lands and lack of economic independence, the Aboriginal people executed and maintained an active resistance to this enforced lifestyle through the late 1890's and into the early twentieth century.⁹ Indeed, to the dismay of pastoralists and the West Australian government, "Aboriginal resistance was particularly intense and effective".¹⁰ However this resistance was met with extremely harsh reactions by the miners and pastoralists who, also claimed that they "were fighting for their lives as well as their livelihood".¹¹ To combat Aboriginal resistance the pastoral lobby used its influence in the Western Australian Parliament to have introduced a series of harsh laws which were intended to pacify Aborigines in the north and allow strict control over those employed in the pastoral industry. According to Haebich, "most members of parliament were simply concerned to protect white employers and workers" and "debate in the Legislative Assembly was intense and characterised by conflict between the pastoralist interest and anti-pastoralist lobby...".¹²

However, from the mid-1890's the monopoly of power by the government, which was representing the interests of the pastoralists in the north, was being eroded by newcomers attracted to the state by the goldrushes. Many of these newcomers brought with them enlightened political views. The newcomers' attacks on the system of employment of Aborigines in the pastoral industry comprised a major part of their strategy in the battle for power in the State Parliament.¹³

Humanitarians who were among the political ranks were shocked by reports of a system of Aboriginal employment akin to slavery where children as young as six years of age and adults worked for meagre rations and were subjected to harsh physical punishments at the hands of their employers. The anti-pastoralists set about campaigning and conveying these inhumane practices into a public forum through columns in the local and British newspapers. The humanist politicians hoped to discredit the pastoralists and the Forrest Government particularly in Britain as this would have a profound effect on migration; the British government was encouraging settlers to its new colony.¹⁴

However, as the campaign gained momentum at the turn of the century, in a fiery speech in the House of Representatives in 1901, the Labor member for Kalgoorlie, Hugh Mahon: "condemned the system of employment of Aboriginal people in the pastoral industry and moved for the appointment of a Royal Commission to inquire into conditions here and the advisability of making Aboriginal affairs a federal responsibility".¹⁵ Leake, the new Premier of Western Australia, disagreed strongly that the pastoralists were at fault. He believed that the 'honour' of the residents of the north was being 'challenged' by 'exaggerated' rumours spread by outsiders. He suggested that the people of the north were humane and would not possibly have degraded themselves like in other 'inhumane' states. However, Premier Leake condoned the laws permitting corporal punishment of Aboriginal workers, claiming the Aboriginal people were not "equal, physically, mentally or by the standards of civilisation to whites and had to be treated differently - with the lash".¹⁶

The call for a Royal Commission was not forthcoming even though the flow of criticism that 'brutal slavery' was still in full swing in the north continued against the pastoralists. This criticism was brought to light in the London Times which led to the British Secretary of State calling for an official comment from the State Government.¹⁷ As a result of this, in 1904 with the support of all

political parties in Western Australia, a Royal Commission was set up to inquire into and report upon the condition of Western Australia's Aborigines.¹⁸

To formally carry out enquires on behalf of the Western Australian Government, Walter Edmund Roth, the Protector of Aborigines for the northern half of Queensland was appointed Commissioner. He was seen to be an outside 'expert' who would be able to produce a well-informed and impartial report on the Aboriginal problems in Western Australia.¹⁹

Ironically the Roth Royal Commission, completed at the end of 1904, did not address the exploitation of Aboriginal labour in the north of Western Australia, the report simply pointed out ways in which the employment of Aborigines by pastoralists could be better regulated.²⁰ The Royal Commission's major recommendations were intended to bring Aboriginal-white relations more in line under the rule of the law.²¹ The Royal Commission's recommendations concerning wages did not address the anomalies in the area of employment conditions and wages sufficiently for Aboriginal people in the north. For example, the Commission's recommendation concerning wages suggested a minimum wage of five shillings per month on land and ten shillings per month on boats, exclusive to food, accommodation, and other necessities; the period of leave of absence to be also paid for. The witnesses who were called upon by the Royal Commission agreed that services rendered by an Aboriginal worker should be paid for, the only differing opinions arising out of the question as to whether the moneys should be paid direct to or into a fund to recoup the Government for the expense of granting Aboriginal indigent relief.

As a result of the absence of any formal or meaningful recommendation regarding wage justice, the non-Aboriginal capitalists continued to exploit Aboriginal people by rewarding their labour in kind.²² Aboriginal labourers continued to be 'rewarded' with food, clothing, tobacco and other necessities. It could be argued that the pastoralists generally recognised the economic value of both the land and the Aborigines. Both had value to be exploited. According to Rowley:

Thus the process of economic exploitation (or development) involved ways of using native labour on the plantation or in the mine. Much was made of the need to transform the warrior into the peaceful worker; and the obvious way to achieve this was to compel him to work for the colonisers. The gospel of peace, brought by the Christian missions fitted nicely into God's plan; for the native races, salvation would come through work. Thus the native became the 'unit of labour'.²³

By 1905, the State Parliament passed legislation to provide for the "care and protection" of all Aboriginal people, enacting only the more 'acceptable' recommendations from the Roth Commissions. The 1905 Act provided for Aboriginal segregation and the removal of Aboriginal children; Chief protectors acquired legal guardianship over every Aboriginal or part Aboriginal child as well as control of all property belonging to them; the Chief Protector could order the removal of any unemployed Aboriginal person to a reserve and declare specific areas out of bounds. The Act also made careful provision to ensure the continued availability of Aboriginal labour particularly in the North.²⁴

However, while the purpose of legislation was seen to be "for their own good" many Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal historians have now described these earlier legislative acts as harsh, extremely repressive and discriminatory in practice.²⁵ Although many of these archaic Acts have now been abolished, it could be argued that the earlier practices which were instituted have continued to shape the lives of many Aboriginal people today.

In examining the Roth Royal Commission findings on the Conditions of Natives in regard to Aboriginal labour in the north, although much pressure was brought to bear on the Western Australian Government, it did little to address the appalling conditions of 'natives' or to alter the status quo. The scope of the Royal Commission, while focusing on a broad range of issues, did not address the racist, paternalistic and exploitative attitudes that were endemic in the broader society. But then why should it? The colonial society was not ready to accept Aboriginal people as equals, they were considered inferior, they needed to be looked after and needed to be treated like children.

In particular, whilst Aboriginal labour was examined in a limited manner, there was enough evidence to suggest that the Aboriginal labourers in the north were subject to working conditions that could only be described as a form of slavery. The notion of cash wages as recommended by the Royal Commission was never taken up and the reward for Aboriginal labour remained payment in kind even though non-Aboriginal society had strong beliefs about how work should be organised, and who should work for what rate of pay. The Royal Commission did little to challenge the inequity of working conditions and wages. The Royal Commission did not result in changes "for the better protection and care of the natives", but rather legislation that was used as an "instrument of control, and ruthless control at that".²⁶

END NOTES

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5. C.D. Rowley, *A Matter of Justice*, Canberra, 1978, p.84.
6. Lines, *op cit.*, p.153.
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15. *Ibid.*, p.72.
16. *Ibid.*, p.73.
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18. Bolton, *op. cit.*, p.29.
19. *Ibid.*, p.129.
20. *Ibid.*, p.127.
21. *Ibid.*, p.127.
22. Rowley, *op cit.*, p.84.
23. *Ibid.*, p.91.
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JERRY REUBEN

Interviewed by Jill Milroy*

Jerry Reuben is a Torres Strait Islander man who spent many years working on the railways in Queensland and Western Australia. Jerry has been heavily involved in union affairs, particularly in improving conditions for Torres Strait Islanders. Jerry, with his wife Dorothy are actively involved with Torres Strait Islander groups in WA and speak on issues involving Islanders and Islander culture at universities, primary and secondary schools.

I was born on Thursday Island but lived on Darnley Island from when I was six. I moved to Thursday Island from 1957 to 1965. I come out of that old stock, where you worked to survive. Our people worked around the Cape (Cape York) area for three pound a month. You were told of work by word of mouth. Money didn't mean a lot to them. They'd throw the money in a bag and take no interest in working because money didn't mean much. After the war (Korean War) the pearling died down in the islands and everyone was looking to move around more but you were still under the Department of Native Affairs Act.

After they abolished the Act we got the right to move around. A lot of people left the islands (Torres Strait) and went to north Queensland to work with the Sugar cane and in the railways. Didn't have any idea of work 'structures' - you know like foremen and what they did - nobody had no idea of unions, though we saw the union flag.

When I went to work on the railways they told you to pay the union fee of twenty five dollars for one year. We did this but we didn't know what it was for. This really began my experience - and later involvement - with the union. I learned that there were unions for all different trades.

My dad was the Government carpenter and I understood when my father was the DNA carpenter he had to pay a 'union ticket'. But he didn't understand what it was for, which 'company' he was working for - the union or the government.

* Jill Milroy is the Director of the Centre for Aboriginal Programmes, University of Western Australia

Lots of our people joined the railways - all DNA workers. Everyone's happy working together. It's like family - you go where you feel comfortable and happy. We were happy to pay the money to the union but we didn't know what it was for and didn't really take advantage of the benefits of being in the union. We didn't get lots of benefits like zone allowances, LHA allowances. We were told to stay away from the unions in the 60's.

When we came out of school, when they make us sign and join the workforce, we had to put our ages up. We were only sixteen and seventeen but you had to be eighteen to join the union and be employed on the Queensland government railway. We had to change our name because of the birth certificates. I used my second name as my surname so I couldn't be found out until I turned 18 and then I went back to my proper name.

A lot of Islanders and Murriss were on the track in the west. Living conditions were really bad - we were living in huts - bond wood - but before that in tents. We didn't see how the white people were working; we only talked among ourselves.

Like we might say about someone, a Murri or Islander worker, "He only came here two weeks, how come he drive the truck?". You were scared to complain in case the union got rid of you. But as soon as one of us left somewhere, other family followed.

The first lot of islanders came here to Western Australia in 1964. About 200 workers were taken from the sugar cane and Queensland railways and brought to Perth to build the railway from upper Swan to Southern cross and later from Southern Cross to Kalgoorlie. The word went around, "there's big money in the West", and everyone who heard about it wanted to come. Many of the island boys used to get into cars and drive over to WA. They didn't worry about the unions, they just wanted to work. In the beginning it was lots of single guys living in caravans at the campsite. Some went back home for good but a lot stayed; they married to Wongis and Noongars.

But every one always had to go back to the Islands sometime. You made lots of money but you used it to get back home as often as you could. Weren't working to better ourselves - you know buy houses or things. We were always drawn home, back to family. Didn't use the money for things or to travel. We could've seen different parts of the world but we'd rather go home. We'd go and get refilled. We're still passing down the past and we still get excited talking about railways.

I left the railway in 1972 and began working with Queensland Nickel. I also got into the 'industrial' side of it. I found out that Norm Gallagher was the BLF boss. I even got a letter from Bob Hawke (ACTU) to come to train to be in the ACTU. I was up north on the Panawonica line from 1972-75. I worked at Karratha for Queensland Nickel for about five years - and I was also learning the difference between a blue collar and white collar worker.

I found out the AWU rate was five dollars an hour, but paid only three dollars an hour in the north-west where it was all AWU workers, but the majority were Islanders. When I started to open my mouth some of the guys in the caravans said that all the time since they'd been there it had only gone up from two dollars seventy five an hour to three dollars an hour. For Pilbarra and Kununurra it should've been around seven dollars an hour for Zone A, including the allowance.

Islanders were told to work for their airfare. The company told us, "If you don't get involved in the union we'll pay your airfare home". This was really important for Islanders - to go home. The company got workers from McKay, Townsville and Cairns to come over. The boys suffered working on the line. There was lots of fear for security and for families and everyone just accepted what was given.

Then we went on strike for one week. We stopped the train for three days, then we had a big Industrial Relations Commission battle - the union against the company. The company argued that there'd been no union stoppage in 12 years and the Commission asked me why.

There was a court case in Dampier and we told the commission, "we're not scared of work but how long's the commission going to hide us from the WA economy".

I was accused of being a stirrer by some other islanders. I was a leading hand at the time but I was promoted to assistant foreman to keep my mouth shut. It was a hard decision - if I took it, it'd be better for my family but I also had to think of going for all the people. We had family arguments about what was best to do and what we'd be giving up, like a company home. We came to the west to start a new life as a family. The company put the pressure on with extra benefits and kept saying, "think of your future". Even the Engineer came in to see me.

Everyone suffered in the strike. We were all frightened to lose. Others told me, "You'll never win Jerry". But working conditions were bad. The boys were often sent to camps; there was no way for getting back on weekends. So we had to fight for

buses. Lunches were taken to the boys on the track, just on a paper plate. It was packed in the morning so by lunchtime in the heat couldn't eat it. There were no esky's or ice or anything. The boys were told to use a dog spike to open the can of milk for coffee - no can openers or anything was provided. But from the islanders there was no fight back over these conditions. Everyone was working for their airfares home and were worried about losing that, so they accepted the low wages and conditions. So we got the Commission and the CMM boss to come out to the track and see what was going on and this convinced the commission that working conditions needed to be better.

When I first went to the union convener he said, "How come you're the only blackfella here - the others not backing you up?". But I kept encouraging others. We had a picket line across and CMM had to pay Hammersley Iron \$3000 a day for each train stopped. On one side of the picket was Hammersley, CMM, Police, and Torres Strait Islanders who were supervisors and foremen. This split many families. On the other side was the Union and Islanders. We had sixty to seventy men on the picket and a roster to man it. The women were cooking and supporting us.

During the strike, even the Islander foremen and leading hands didn't want to help - because they were worried about losing their work. They told us, "If you don't want to work, go back home". But we were all relatives, like family. The company really tried to split us up.

After the dispute we won 90% of everything - our wages went up and we got a bus and better lunches. Years later my cousin said to me, "Jerry from what you did then, this company became the best in the north-west". The money and living is good now in the north-west but we had to fight for it.

Our dispute was round the same time as Nookanbah. We couldn't go but we protested at the highway outside Karratha to try to stop trucks from going up to Nookanbah.

Islanders are good workers but our work has not really been recognised, like in the railway heritage. When we were building the track from upper swan, for the kilometre near Toodjay, the Islander workers broke the record for laying track. We got a carton of beer, but no extra wages. We broke the record again on the Port Headland to Newman track. Islanders are good fast workers but there's been little recognition for our contribution to the WA economy and to the companies. By working fast and hard we saved companies lots of time and money. We didn't think about this at the time we just wanted to do a good job.

BILL ETHEL

Interview by Amanda Bell

The Noonkanbah conflict in the Kimberley region and the dispute over the redevelopment of the Old Swan Brewery in Perth saw the unions going outside traditional interests about concerns and conditions of their own workers and becoming involved in Aboriginal land rights and heritage issues.

The Noonkanbah conflict involved a dispute between, CRA owned Amax Mining Company, supported by the Court Liberal State Government and the Noonkanbah community arose over fundamental differences in beliefs and understanding of land management, ownership and responsibilities. The Unions became involved in a "landmark in the modern history of Aboriginal Australia" which "although technically about resolving conflict over Aboriginal sites, is now seen as a watershed event in relation to land rights generally".¹

Mining company moves to mine significant sites and in particular, a secret sacred site, Pea Hill, met with opposition from the Noonkanbah Aboriginal community along with other Aboriginal groups across Australia, religious and political leaders. The massive groundswell from the community in general was further supported by trade union bans and provided national and international focus without which, there is little doubt that the dispute would have occurred.

The dispute over the re-development of the Old Swan Brewery on Mounts Bay Road, again saw union support for an political issue outside of traditional union concerns. As with Noonkanbah, without union support, the dispute over redevelopment would not have reached the level of prominence

Both the Aboriginal and non- Aboriginal community claim the site has significance. Where both sides claim heritage value, non-Aboriginal groups see the value laying essentially in the building and the non-Aboriginal community, less obviously see value in the land itself.

This proposal to redevelop the site was strongly opposed by the both the Aboriginal community led by Robert Bropho, of the Swan Valley Fringe dwellers

as well as the non-Aboriginal community. Many non-Aboriginal people were opposed to the government plan due to concerns about the potential for traffic problems on Mounts bay Road; there had been a number of fatal accidents in recent years in the vicinity of the Brewery. Union involvement began early in the dispute, opposition based on the road safety hazard and the strong Aboriginal claim to the land ²

Both Noonkanbah and the redevelopment of the Old Swan Brewery illustrate moves within sectors of the union movement to become involved in political and social justice issues which go beyond traditional union domestic concerns . Prominent unionist Jack Munday when visiting the site at the height of the Brewery dispute in 1992 set the tone for future union involvement with stating that "Workers have a right and a responsibility to become involved in political issues, such as the brewery development which went well beyond the wages and conditions of workers." The Brewery project was just another example of property developers trying to push their own barrows and, despite an excess of office space in Perth, expand construction along the foreshore.³

The following interview is with Bill Ethel as President of the Construction, Mining and Energy, Timberyard, Sawmills and Roadworkers Union of Australia and State Secretary for the WA Branch of the Construction Forestry, Mining and Energy Workers of Australia

The CMEU is known around the place as supporting lots of different groups. Five years ago we were approached by Len Colbung who said they had got concerns about the way the Brewery was going to be developed and explained what their position was. They told us they were going to occupy the site, this was just leading up to Christmas . They didn't come to us and say can we occupy the site they just they just told us we are going to occupy the site and they wanted to let us know so we could make preparations for that. We had a meeting with our members, sorry, with the delegates from the big jobs from around the city as soon as they came back after the Christmas holidays and put it to them that we shouldn't work on the job and we should ban work on the site until the government negotiated with the Aboriginal community. The delegates agreed and we stopped work. There was an election of February that year. We eventually had a mass meeting of our members and after a meeting of a over

thousand there only 14 who voted to work on the job. The Liberal Party said they wouldn't proceed with the Brewery if they won the election so we said we won't work till after the election in case they won. The election saw Dowding win by a narrow margin so we then had a long conflict with the government, the builders and some parts of the union movement As we got more involved we became more aware of the Aboriginal claims to the sight which we endorse and we kept the ban on for nearly four years. The Arbitration Commission at the request of the State Government threatened to deregister the union unless we worked on the job. We had a mass meeting last year and only by a majority of 15, we voted to work on the job rather than get deregistered. Deregistration for the union would have virtually knocked it out of existence. So that was the problem that we had and we were party to the picketline on the job that was going 24 hours a day for a year. We argued that within the trade union movement that we should maintain the ban.

What happened recently was the developer Multiplex can't get a tenant and can't sell the job, can't sell the building to the buyer that they've got, because of the legal problems. I think somebody will buy down there, provided the legal obstacles are cleared away. In terms of Aboriginal support within the union movement I think it's changed in the last few years and there is a lot of support for Aboriginal initiatives, but as one union is set up against each other so is one Aboriginal set against a community too on the support that it can attract from other groups. I was involved in the Yakabindie and went up to Wiluna and participated in the meetings with the community there. I've been involved to some extent to the work that has been done in the Pilbara by the Karajini Corporation I went out to the Western Desert a few years ago to talk to the people at Cotton Creek about the impact of uranium mining at Kintyre. I've also been involved in the Western Desert Lands Council because I've got the responsibility in this union for contacting different Aboriginal groups around the place and I find as I talk to all their unions that there is a lot of support. Its just a matter of working out a way of locking that support into something practical because people sometimes see the union movement as being more powerful than it actually, is and can make demands of the union movement that can't be delivered. The issue about the graves at Rottnest Island is one that we have been very involved with, we were the ones who put the ban on the old jail being developed the way the Bond Corporation wanted it developed and we've played a role since then. But I think you need to campaign for more effective roles supporting Aboriginal issues but often union activists and particularly union officials have a whole range of issues to deal with and you tend to deal with the

ones you are used to dealing with. The hours are often long and there is always more work to do, there is always something you can do on a Sunday or a Saturday. I have found people get frustrated with dealing with Aboriginal groups because its a different method of work, its a lot more time consuming than it is say dealing with the white action group or a migrant group or group with a communist specific ethos.

It is possible, and there would be a lot of support for more Aboriginal involvement, but the first thing to do is get involved in the workforce because unions represent people that work. If you are not involved in the workforce its very difficult to get involved in the union, that's where you get your stripes, so to speak, by your activities in the factory or the mine or a building site. That's where you get recognised by the union, that's where you get your training for dealing with the problems that you're dealing with. Because Aboriginal people don't play a big role in the workforce for a variety of reasons there is not that space available for them to get involved and I think what we have got to do is insist on some form of affirmative action. But then you've got a company in recession and there is a global surplus of labour and you will get a company saying 'well I'm not going to put the time into the special needs of Aboriginal people' and 'we want the factory to open and close at this particular time'. Unemployment is high in almost every industrialised country. I don't think there is any clear answers, its a hard one.

For the union movement you have virtually got to be an industrial worker to get in. If you're not, well people think that you don't really understand the issues of the working class. A lot of people come into the union movement from the universities and are often disappointed because they are articulate and they have got the skills to handle the structures and the bureaucracies but they then seem to use the union movement move into other fields. People who have been in this union are David Parker, Peter Cook, Bill Thomas and they see a union as the place where they learn some skills and then go somewhere else and I don't, in some senses see anything wrong with that. Maybe that's a way for Aboriginal people to get a better understanding of the union movement, to go and work within the unions as a bureaucrat or industrial officer or training role and then go and do something else but the people who generally stay in unions are the ones that have worked on the ground for a period of years.

Migrants will say the same thing, that there is not a lot of Italian union organisers or Greek union organisers. I was talking to a bloke whose parents

were Italian building workers, he went to university and he is now State Manager of one of the big construction companies , a traditionally Italian owned construction companies and he said, 'you know we don't want Italian speaking people as activists we want people who can communicate with the management, we don't want to have language problems and similarly we don't want people with cultural problems'. The trade union movement in the main, is part of that. There are a few unions that break away from that and become radical, but most of the unions I see have become part of the management structure. I mean you have Blacksmiths that become union officials and they wear black suits and ties and get called Mr this and Mr that. Unions are going out of fashion but many employers want unions that can control or help them control what is the naturally anarchic nature of work and some people don't really want to work on a building site. I mean no one really wants to go work in a hole in the ground, so you have to force people to do that work and its part of the managements job to stop that rebelliousness of the union officials. Aboriginal people don't necessarily want to be part of that. They are part of an oppressed group that don't want to become part of the oppressor, and the union officials are often the oppressor group.

I've spent time with American Indians, very involved in the union movement and the Maori's are far more involved in New Zealand than a lot of Aboriginal people and I think at the end of the day when you've got all the problems that Aboriginal people have got there are other fights.

1. Noonkanbah. Whose Land Whose Law. Stephen Hawke and Michael Gallagher, 1989, in Connell and Howitt)
2. BLF brewery support splits building unions "The West Australian" June 6 1992.
3. Union brawlers mar rally "The West Australian". Friday June 19 1992.

An interview with Colleen Hayward as Senior Vice President of the State School Teachers Union*

Interview by Amanda Bell and Narelle Thorne

Colleen Hayward is a Nyoongar women who has a Bachelor of Education from Edith Cowan University and a Bachelor of Science in Aboriginal and Community Development, from the Centre for Aboriginal Studies., Curtin University. Colleen has long experience as a teacher and has been became involved with the State School Teachers Union as a member ,an organiser and then as Senior Vice President in 1993.. Colleen has a large family network which extends from the South West region up into the Pilbara.

Personal background

I am one of six kids. Mum's white, our Aboriginality comes from Dad and Dad's family. All of our roots are down in the Broomehill, Gnowangerup area although there are so many branches of the family tree that's it all through the south-west and up as far as Carnarvon. There's a lot of family close in the metro area which is really good and supportive as well. Mum and dad met at Teachers college, so they were both teachers. Dad went on to become the first Aboriginal Principal in the state who was formally trained to be able to teach in mainstream schools. I suppose with both parents being teachers, while they certainly didn't push us into teaching as an occupation, they definitely pushed us into education. It didn't matter what we wanted to do, all of that was fine, but we were just told straight up '*no, none of you are leaving school unless you've got qualifications or a trade certificate or something like that. Then even if you head off and go to Europe or around the world or whatever you've got something to come back to that's a formal qualification*' While in the back of your mind you know the sense of that it's not something you necessarily agree with at the time. In hindsight it was really useful and I suppose for most of the time that I was growing up and at school all I ever really wanted to be was a teacher too, so when I left high school I went to Teachers College. One of my sisters and one of my

brothers are also teachers so there's three of us out of the six. They both work in Aboriginal education over in the Ministry so that's quite good too.

I taught for 11 years and then came to work in the Teachers Union here a few years ago - I was an organiser. I then left and went into the Ministry's central office and was working at the start of their Aboriginal studies curriculum project. I did a little bit of work with the Royal Commission into Deaths in Custody in the issues unit here in Perth and then came back to the union as a senior officer. So it has been a bit of a mix but very good opportunities and I would certainly say that it's because I have had the opportunity to have a good education. A lot of our people don't have that opportunity or their experiences have been so bad that they don't see it as an opportunity for them. I just think that my brothers and sisters and I have been really lucky in that regard.

While I was teaching I headed back and did some part time study and got my Bachelor of Education; I also went back to the Centre for Aboriginal Studies at Curtin and did their Bachelor of Science in Aboriginal Community Management and Development. While most of my work has been mainstream I have always found that I need to keep in contact - close and regular contact with our community, to be able to survive in the mainstream one.

What do you think it was about your Dad that pushed you into education?

I think maybe for him he had already experienced having that opportunity for an education and formal qualifications opened up new horizons for him. He was already coming from a *'been there, done that and I know that it works'* perspective instead of thinking *'well look I didn't get the chance but I want you to have the chance'*. He believed very strongly that education was the key to employment and to life opportunities.

Dad was Principal in Wiluna in the late seventies and 1980-81, so it's not very long ago. He died at the end of 1981 when he was still only young. He was only 52 when he died. One of the things that was really good was not only what he did for the school but for the kids and the community there, for instance, the improvements that happened in the school like actually having the kids picked up and coming in and having showers and breakfast at the school. There's a fair few of those sort of projects and activities that happen in different schools now but he sort of started a lot of that at Wiluna so it was quite a different way of

operating. There was a lot of acceptance from the Aboriginal community up there too. Even though they weren't Nyungars they still appreciated the fact that the principal was an Aboriginal principal. I guess too, because dad was Aboriginal, he interacted with the community in a different way. If there was an issue with some of the kids he'd go and talk to the elders about it so that it could be dealt with in a community way. I think that's probably happening in more schools nowadays but then it was a new and different kind of approach. The other really positive thing I suppose from a broader perspective was that a lot of other family members and then other people, especially Nyungars, saw that dad was in there and doing it. It gave them the confidence to do it too and I think that's a really positive thing.

What about your experience of work as a teacher, was that a mixture of city and country?

Yeah, a mixture of city and country but more in the city. All my teaching experience has been with primary schools but that's really good too. I mean, I really enjoy it and I think you've got really positive relations with the kids when they're that age. When you think about them being only 9, 10 or 12, you know, that kind of age but they're now grown up and have kids of their own. A lot of those kids were Aboriginal kids who I still keep in touch with. Like early this week an ex-student who has now got three kids, I think, and has been living in Melbourne for the last 10 years just rang to have a chat and she was great. I remember her at primary school where she wasn't too sure of whether she wanted to make a go of it or not. She really identified with me and ended up working hard and was dux of the school when she was in year 7. So it's really, I think, when there are Aboriginal people there Aboriginal kids don't feel so isolated. There is much more confidence to be able to achieve. I think the ability has always been there it's the other things that hold our kids back.

What about working in the school environment, has that been difficult?

Yes, in some regards it has though I suppose I was always a bit lucky. I mean, I would classify myself as a good teacher and I really enjoyed it and found that the kids in my classes enjoyed it which means they don't play up for you. They might when they have a relief teacher or something but you don't actually get that which was good. It has always been a struggle because usually, especially in the Metro area, you'd be the only Aboriginal teacher on staff. We didn't have an AEW so there wasn't anybody else Aboriginal on staff. You know you had to be

fighting the fight yourself as far as what was appropriate and what wasn't appropriate curriculum to be going on in classrooms and with some of the teachers attitude. I think there's been some improvements in that it's much better than it was but there's still a long way to go. It does put you in an isolated position trying to fight that very necessary fight on your own and sometimes with people who didn't really understand that it was even a fight worth having. So sometimes I suppose there are feelings of isolation. Certainly in unions you don't have many Aboriginal people working in any capacity and most of the ones that are would be in targeted positions, like Trevor Uink at the TLC. Now Trevor does a great job but I think that there are still some people who kind of think, 'Oh yeah well he does a great job because he's Aboriginal but he can only do a great job in an Aboriginal area'. Whereas I reckon he could do a great job in any area so there's that kind of perception that you've still got to break down. Again, it's part of the process of changing peoples' attitudes over time and just hanging in there long enough to see some change.

How did you first get involved with the union?

I got involved when I was still teaching. I'd always been a union member right from when I was at college and just decided that I probably needed to take a more active part. This union is actually really good as far as its policy position on Aboriginal issues. You know for instance, we are one of the unions in this state that has a policy in support of Land Rights and have had for years. When you've got good policy like that it makes it very easy; it doesn't make the progress of things very easy, but, you know that you've got the support to try to progress issues. So when I was still teaching I actually came in on the union's Aboriginal Education committee. Once you get involved you get more interested and I kind of thought, oh well, look I might be able to do more in the area of Aboriginal education if I'm actually working in here. I was doing some other things as well but it was mostly through Aboriginal Education that I became more interested in union involvement.

Why do you think a lot of Aboriginal people are not involved in unions?

I think Aboriginal people have a fundamental problem on a couple of fronts. Firstly, to be eligible as a member of most unions you need to be employed in that industry. Now with our Aboriginal unemployment rates that automatically rules out a large proportion of our community from even having the option to join if they wanted to. So there's that. The other thing is that unions haven't

always been particularly good to, or for, Aboriginal people, though I'm pleased to say that unions are increasingly recognising this. You know, for instance, unions endorsed the 'White Australia' policy especially in Queensland with the cane plantations. Historically they haven't taken a strong stand and certainly hadn't been seen to support Aboriginal people. So there's a fair degree of cynicism I think on the part of the Aboriginal community as to you know 'why should I do that?' or 'why should I join a union they're probably not going to do anything for me?'

I think the access argument is a very strong one because I don't think there is a very strong recognition of what unions are about or what they can do. The structure and the culture of them is quite alien because it's hierarchical and bureaucratic and formal. It's paper warfare and tends to operate in a way that's not comfortable or familiar for Aboriginal people. The language is too jargonistic and a lot of those things really need to be broken down to encourage Aboriginal people to be more involved

Within your time in the union have you seen a change with the relationship between Aboriginal people and unions?

I think so. Yes, through some of the work that's been done, and we've been doing some, but probably more through the TLC and also the ACTU. There are some publications that are user friendly about what's an award and why you need one; how you get access to it or find out what's in your award; how to go to your union. Some of the publications in the way of brochures, booklets and posters all pick up on Aboriginal themes. They're usually designed by Aboriginal artists so there is seen to be a real commitment to trying to get the message across in a more accessible way. Some of the other changes, and once again I think this union is more forward thinking than a lot of the other unions, is that all of the organisers in here for instance have participated in a cross cultural awareness course specifically so that they are better able to deal with Aboriginal people, and other cultural groups too. The focus was on working with Aboriginal people in a culturally appropriate way and where they weren't using terminology that they thought was okay but was really offensive to an Aboriginal person. Things like that I think have been a very, very strong move forward and some of the contact we have with our Aboriginal members and some of the other Aboriginal people working in education that are considering being members has been very positive because of that. We fund Aboriginal people onto specific training courses and professional development courses through the union so that they can actually

see that they've got a contribution to make, they are recognised and valued, and that the agenda can be progressed too. So those changes I think are very positive.

What about Aboriginal Women in Unions?

It is interesting because once again I think from a couple of tacks you are right about unions generally excluding women, even in unions where there is a predominance of women members you still tend to have blokes in the hierarchy making the decisions. To a certain extent it's still like that with us but that's being broken down. It's certainly like that as a generalisation across the union movement. That brings in the TLC too but there have been some pretty conscious steps to break that down like affirmative action positions on the TLC executive and things like that. Now there is still not enough done but at least it's some steps in the right direction. I guess for me it's been quite interesting because in the broader union movement they tend to think 'Oh God, she's a woman' but after they get to know you and they see the work that you do and the line that you run they forget about that because you are a person doing the job and doing it well. I think within our union there's been the same kind of thing in terms of my Aboriginality. For instance, when I was first elected I don't think that a lot of people would have realised that I was Aboriginal but over the last few years very few of our monthly journals would not carry articles on Aboriginal education and Aboriginal issues including the rebutting of the Mabo myths. I mean, we've really got into issues that are pretty broad but supportive and our members have thought, 'Well Colleen's Aboriginal and we can see that she is doing it so that's all ok', and I think they have really developed a positive attitude. In a way that has almost snuck up on them; they didn't know, then they think 'yeah that's ok', and that's good because it means that it wasn't threatening.

What are the benefits of unions to Aboriginal people?

I think that for a lot of Aboriginal people who are in employment, you know, the ones that are in a sense lucky to at least be employed, for a long time its almost been hit and miss as to whether or not they have even got award conditions. Still now, a lot of Aboriginal organisations who get their funding through ATSIIC have had to put in greater grants because they have never paid their Aboriginal workers occupational superannuation. Now that's an award entitlement that every other worker gets but our people haven't been getting. Often it's 'we can't afford to pay that', so people miss out and many of our people that are in paid

employment don't even have award coverage; or they haven't had access to it. For instance, if you've worked in, let's say media, you wouldn't necessarily be getting the same conditions and same rates of pay as other people working in mainstream media even if you've got the same job and the same qualifications etc.

Do you see a solution to these problems?

Yes, increasingly there are unions who are saying, 'look Aboriginal workers in Aboriginal organisation are a group of people who need to have union and award coverage' and that is actually happening now which is another positive step. One of the other things that I have got to say which is of grave concern to me is CDEP funding. CDEP is a community decision, so essentially instead of everybody getting their individual unemployment benefits cheque it's pooled within the community and people who work access their payments out of that pool. That's it put simply. I recognise and there is no question that it's good for the community in that it's a community decision and it enables people to stay in the community instead of having to move away from family and that sort of support to try get a job. For a lot of those positive things it's a good idea. But, where I don't like it, is that it essentially means that Aboriginal people in CDEP communities are working for the dole. Nobody else in this country has to do that. So if they are doing that work we've got to get governments and other organisations to recognise that it's valuable for Aboriginal people to be able to stay in their own communities and they ought to be putting in extra funds so that Aboriginal people should be able to do that and get paid proper award rates while they are doing it.

Communities in remote areas, if they want any public services like roads, gardens, sanitary facilities, are doing that work but they are still getting paid their unemployment rates. One of the positive aspects is that it gives Aboriginal people some opportunity to be learning other skills but once again I think they ought to be paid properly for doing it. So there's good and bad in it. Where it is of concern I think it's a union issue because it's about award rates. As well as that, for instance when you link it back to education which is our unions area, some of the AEW's - in some schools not across the board - are actually paid by CDEP funds. So we have got people in our system who are paid like that and you wouldn't have anyone non-Aboriginal doing that.

What's the feeling in the community about CDEP?

I don't know how much there is a real recognition in the community that that's what you are doing (working for dole), but that's the negative part. The positive side of it is at least people are there with their family and support. I think there is a fair bit of community perception that it would be good for youth that are running off the tracks; that at least they are there and they are seen to be gainfully employed. So there's that kind of business that I think people see as positive but it would be just as positive and more so if they were paid properly. But yeah, I do wonder myself about how much appreciation in the community there is about what it really means.

In your role in the union do you go out to communities?

It depends, though that's much more the role of my brother and sister who are in the Ministry. It will depend on what the issue is. If I'm on an itinerary visiting teachers in a particular area then it's always worthwhile if you can link that in with a community meeting as well. I think that's worth while anyway but with me being Aboriginal I think that's its critical that when you are in somebody else's place you treat them with the respect they deserve and I feel like I have got to do that as well as it being the right thing to do.

How well do you think unions understand the obligations Aboriginal people have that non-Aboriginal people may not have

I think that it's been better since our organiser did the cross cultural awareness course. That really brought some things home that they wouldn't have either anticipated or thought about before.

What does the cross cultural awareness course involve?

The course is looking at people's biases, so the underlying theme is how much racism is going on out there and how much do we get into making judgements about things that lock us into supporting stereotypes. Now we recognise that a lot of stereotypes are about race and about gender but the course does it in a non threatening way by depersonalising and taking it out of the context that they are in. Then you look at the judgements you have already made and whether you were making them in a biased or unbiased way and what some of those biases

may have been. The course looks at power issues and relationships; it's very good because it makes people more sensitive and more aware.

Has it been positive?

Yes its been good because, for instance, though we haven't been able to negotiate for our members yet, the conditions of work agreement for people employed in the union actually has a section on cultural leave and we've applied to have that in our award for our members. This would mean like when you've got family obligations and you're going to need extra bereavement leave and things like that. There are also going to be occasions that are specifically to do with the Aboriginal community and not mainstream that are going to be a time commitment like NAIDOC for instance and other Aboriginal celebrations.

Are you under pressure to supply all the Aboriginal 'expertise' in your organisation?

I'm lucky in this position because nobody is able to do that to me. They can raise stuff and we talk about that and I think that is positive. But they've got to then go away and enact that in a culturally appropriate way instead of thinking 'this is too hard for me' or 'give it to somebody else' because that doesn't do anything as far as improving their skills. People in here are really good and once again I think that's linked back to the cross cultural training that they've had.

Do you see problems specific to Aboriginal teachers?

The obvious potential one is racism. You know you will come across some stories, but they only ever get to the story stage. It's not ever formalised but some people would actually be able to say to you 'Oh yeah such and such a family withdrew their kids from that school and took them to another school because their child was going to be in an Aboriginal teacher's class', but that doesn't happen very often.

There is a broader definition of racism too if, for instance an employer won't recognise the need for extra bereavement leave or law business. While that doesn't sound directly racist I actually put that under the 'racism' umbrella because it's a lack of appreciation and sensitivity and a lack of accommodation of other cultural needs. This is starting to improve now though.

Is teaching a better area to be in , in terms of racism?

Yes I think so because at least with you being qualified as an AEW or as a teacher you are in there on an equal footing with everybody else. You know it's not like a big organisation where you have all the mainstream up here and you have all the Aboriginal people working at level 1. Everybody is on the same footing and that, in a sense I don't know that it forces the issue, but the issue is just not there to be addressed because everybody is on that equal footing. So in that sense it's an easier industry in which to work for Aboriginal people

Does the union have anything to do with curriculum in schools?

It does sometimes. For instance very often when the Ministry is developing curriculum they will have a reference group or a group of critical readers or something like that and on some of those, though not all of them by any means, the union will be represented. So sometimes there's the avenue for input and once again our organisers are pretty schooled at social justice issues across the board so that if stuff is not worded in an appropriate way at least if they're on those reference groups they are able to say that need to be changed or have you actually checked with these people.

Aboriginal studies are being trialled in some schools and pretty successfully too. I was in Paraburdoo talking to teachers and they were running Aboriginal studies with years 8 and 9 and took advantage of me being there. As you can imagine they don't have many guest speakers dropping through and so they said have you got time to come and talk to the kids as part of their Aboriginal studies. So that's good and I think it was; I felt good about that because it demonstrated that those members thought 'well Colleen's Aboriginal so we'll use her'; that was very positive.

There is always a long way to go and I suppose it may be my background as a teacher you have to look at every tiny little step that's positive and in the right direction and then you may be able to survive yourself instead of going crazy. You think well at least if it's sure and steady it's likely to stay there whereas if there it's a dramatic change it might change back just as dramatically. In that sense unions are very good at challenging the system when otherwise the challenge may not be made. The Union has been positive in running some pretty controversial articles to present a better balance to the debate because

teachers and students are often only getting one side of the story which is exaggerated, it's hysterical all the stuff that happens in the press.

The people that I work with that are more sensitised to the issues and have a complete understanding and appreciation of my need to be involved with the community and to be involved with other Aboriginal people and they know, I sort of always describe it as it's good for the soul because you just need that contact and that support.

I have tried to explain to non-Aboriginal people where succeeding in mainstream can be seen as selling out and you can't argue with that, I mean I have a view, for instance, about a lot of Aboriginal kids who don't succeed in school. It's not because they are not capable its almost deliberate because the system stinks as far as our kids are concerned - inappropriate methods, inappropriate curriculum. But if you succeed in that everybody thinks it okay, everybody thinks the system's okay and there's no move to change it. It's only when enough people are saying it's not okay, by whatever means, and sometimes it's by dropping out or by truanting or not achieving, that it forces the issue of having a look at the system. I think it's the same in mainstream employment and I feel myself that people are a little but wary if they don't know you. But you know they are waiting to know one way or another and you usually save yourself or kill yourself by what you say. You know you're being tested but you know you do what you've got to do and if you're running the right line people recognise in the first couple of minutes that you haven't sold out and that's okay. Or they'll make a judgment that somebody has sold out and they'll treat them accordingly and that's fair.

I don't think I have sold out and I don't think I've copped any flak once people have made the assessment. I don't feel uncomfortable or that it's unreasonable that they make that assessment; I think that's appropriate.. We ought to be judged by our own essentially. To a large extent, the fact that you are Aboriginal is seen as legitimising a whole heap of stuff. Now if you are not prepared to take a stand you ought to be taken to task, otherwise you let the side down.