New year brings new beginnings and challenges

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander readers are warned that this article contains names of deceased persons.

Kaya! Welcome back members to the new year – a year of new beginnings and, as always, new challenges.

For those who have joined our profession – welcome! I wish you the very best of luck for your year ahead. Your union is here to offer support when required.

As we head into 2026, I cannot help but reflect on a significant collective action that occurred 60 years ago. I am talking about the Wave Hill Walk-Off.

I still remember a few years ago teaching my Year 8 students about this momentous event while discussing Kev Carmody and Paul Kelly's song *From Little Things Big Things Grow.*

While this song is famous across Australia, fewer people know the story of the Gurindji people it tells.

Wave Hill Station was established in the 1880s on the lands of the Gurindji people by British pastoralists. The station is approximately 600 kilometres south of Darwin. What is not widely known are the massacres of many First Nations people over many decades and also the taking of children from 1911 onwards in the area.

In 1914, the station was purchased by the Vestey Brothers, a large British meatworks company. The working conditions for First Nations people were shocking, with seldom any wages received.

Labourers were often beaten or even killed for defying or standing up to the landowners. Due to the geographic isolation of the station, this abhorrent treatment continued for the next 50 years, despite changes occurring in the rest of the country. First Nations workers received one-third of the wages that non-Aboriginal workers received.

Eventually news spread to the Gurindji people by visitors and union officials about First Nations activism in the rest of the country. The Gurindji elected Vincent Lingiari as their leader and spokesman and on 23 August 1966, the Wave Hill workers and their families walked off the station and began their strike. This included 200 Gurindji labourers, stockmen, domestic workers and their families. The strikers were also assisted by Dexter Daniels, a union organiser with the North Australian Workers' Union (NAWU). Daniels was instrumental in travelling to remote stations lobbying First Nations' workers to advocate for equal pay.

The strikers camped at Daguragu (Wattie Creek), while waiting for equal pay and also rightful return of their traditional lands. Many believed the Gurindji strikers would be easily satisfied by improved working conditions, but this was not enough, hence the strike continued for eight years.

It was during this time that Lingiari and several workers' unions travelled the length and breadth of Australia raising awareness of the issues faced by his people and to lobby politicians for recognition of First Nations' rights.

Finally, in 1975, the Whitlam Government managed to negotiate a deal with the Vesteys to return part of the traditional lands back to the Gurindji people.

The Wave Hill Walk Off is one of the most important events in our country's history and the Gurindji campaign was an important influence on the passing of the *Aboriginal Land Rights Act (Northern Territory) 1976*.

As stated by then ACTU First Nations officer Kara Keys in 2016: "It is a great legacy because the union movement nationwide galvanised around the workers and gave them great support.

It is a great legacy because it fundamentally shifted the NAWU and other unions in the country. It showed unions that Indigenous workers were willing to fight for wage equality and it shifted unions to the role of supporting and fighting for all workers. And it is a great legacy because while the trigger for the Wave Hill Walk-Off was equal wages, the gun powder was the systemic racism, poor living conditions, a legislative environment which allowed for the theft of children from their families and the theft of Aboriginal people having any agency over their own lives."

As we go into our bargaining year, fighting for better improvement and conditions, I want you to remember this moment in history.

While we may feel we have come a long way, there is still so much to do to strengthen cultural responsiveness in all our workplaces, have a First Nations voice in our curriculum and to ensure our schools are properly resourced to establish the Aboriginal Cultural Standards Framework.

This is the responsibility of everyone, not only our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander brothers and sisters. As your union, we look forward in 2026 to our Reconciliation in Action Plan being endorsed and working hard to build vital relationships with our oldest continuing culture in the world.



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