

Murray Norris

Rebuilding the North Australian Workers Union, 1942-1951

After leaving the Northern Territory, **Murray Norris** (1914-1986) was for many years an active trade unionist on the Sydney waterfront. Murray was a member of the Communist Party from 1932 until his death in 1986. He wrote this memoir in 1982.

AFTER Mick Ryan, who was Secretary of the North Australian Workers Union at the time of the bombing,¹ was taken out of the Northern Territory by the Army, most of the executive of the union left the NT either into the Army, or were sent out in the general exodus that took place at that time. The only ones that were left to my knowledge were Joseph “Yorky” Walker, Bob Anthony, Jack Meaney. One or two drifted back later but never was there a quorum to hold Executive meetings (unless union reps were brought in). Yorky Walker in Darwin, Bob Anthony and Jack Meaney in Katherine, Bert Field at Pine

1 The Japanese air force bombed Darwin on 19 February 1942. There was sporadic bombing until November 1943, but 19 February is remembered as the day 243 died and the exodus from Darwin began.

Creek, were the main ones trying to get the union back on a solid footing, without much success as the Minister of the Interior, the Minister of Works and Housing and the Minister for the Army had stated very firmly that it wasn't necessary to have a union in the NT and if there was to be one it would be the AWU,² not the NAWU.

The union's newspaper, the *Northern Standard*, had been taken over by the Army and they printed their own paper, the *Army News*, on the machines taken from the Standard Printery. The union building was like all other buildings: taken over by the Army also. Yoriky Walker arranged for Jack McPhillips, then Assistant General Secretary of the Ironworkers Union, to become Trustee for the NAWU and this kept some of the assets of the union together. Yoriky was acting as provisional secretary of the Union. He had been Vice-President before the bombing and also Vice-President of the ALP Darwin Branch. He had been put to work on the Railway Line after the bombing as he had refused to leave the NT and had then been conscripted into the CCC³ when that organisation was set up. He lived in a railway house nearly opposite the Parap Hotel.

Bob Anthony who was a railway engine driver, and used to stay in the house when in Darwin, arranged for Yoriky to move in. The railway management were given a gentle hint not to interfere and in the interest of peace they turned a blind eye to Yoriky's occupation until the end of the war, when the Manager paid him a visit, and expressed great surprise at seeing him there, and told him that he must get out within the week. As arrangements were in hand to take back the union building (without the permission of the Town Marshall) and have the power put on, this didn't

2 The AWU was, and still is, a very large union with members in a wide range of manual labour jobs, such as shearing, farm work, road construction and the building industry. Its leadership was pro-Arbitration, often cooperative towards employers and fiercely anti-communist, though independent of the industrial groups movement. It was extremely powerful within the Labor Party, and at the time, dominant in the Queensland Labor government.

3 The Civil Construction Corps consisted of civilians (and sometimes "enemy aliens") drafted to carry out war works.

worry Yorky very much.

During 1941 and part of 42 I had been working on the East-West Road, from Mt Isa to Tennant Creek, and had managed to set up camp committees in nearly all the camps, and have delegates elected to a central camp committee so that we could have a general plan for the part of the road. We were very hostile at the methods and attitude of the heads of the MRC⁴ on the road, especially after the bombing. We had a meeting convened at Camoweal, two chaps came from Brisbane, and we claimed that the lack of planning and incompetence was holding up the building of the road.

We challenged them to leave one section of the road under the direct supervision of a camp committee and we would guarantee to compete a mile a day of bitumen. At that time if a camp did half a mile a day it was a record. My camp at Cattle Creek was chosen (we were pretty naïve at the time) as the guinea pigs, and to the great amazement of the heads we did a mile a day for 28 days and the[y] ran out of all materials as the heads couldn't keep up the supply. They broke the camp up and transferred us hell west and crooked. Three of us that had been the main spokesmen finished up at Snake Creek, outside Adelaide River. This was a big camp and I met here some of the chaps that greatly assisted in getting the union going again—Ron Hancock, who later became Assistant General Secretary of the BWIU (and who is now retired and living at Yeppoon near Rockhampton Qland), Reg McCawley, Ted Goonan, Ken Scott and a few others whose names escape me now.

We set up a camp committee and I put forward the idea of getting all other camps to set up committees and to elect delegates to a central camps' committee. Ron Hancock and myself met Yorky Walker and talked it over with him, and we had a further meeting at Pine Creek with other members that Yorky brought along. It was decided at this meeting that that would be a good way to really give the union a solid base. After

4 Main Roads Commission of Queensland.

that we used to meet at different places once a month, sometimes at Katherine, sometimes Pine Creek, sometimes at Adelaide River or Darwin. It meant leaving your camp very early and hitch-hiking sometimes 200 miles to the meeting and then getting back. Sometimes we would get a truck to go “fishing” and then take off. We wouldn’t get any fish that day but we were laying the groundwork to get some fish in the future.

In later 1943, conditions in the camps as regards medical health were very poor and we couldn’t get the Army doctors to take any notice of our complaints. Neither would Senator Joseph Silver Collings, Minister of the Interior, take any notice of us; instead he would refer the matter to his head men of the Works and Housing and CCC, “Red” Ted Theodore and Frank Packer,⁵ and apparently they used to take the same attitude as the Army.

We finally issued them with an ultimatum that unless some action was taken to improve the medical situation we would stop work all over the NT at a certain date. They must have laughed their heads off. They knew that we didn’t have any transport or communications or so they thought. It never entered their heads that we might use their transport and their communications. The ultimatum expired and work stopped and the amazement was great. Army brass made threatening sounds about driving us back to work at the point of the bayonet etc. After three or four days, when we were holding a strike committee meeting at Snake Creek, a high Army brass in a big staff car with a mass of outriders came over and told us that John Curtin the Prime Minister wanted to speak to the Strike Committee. He [the Army brass] was nearly having a stroke at the same time. We went over to the Signals Headquarters and Ron Hancock and Yorky Walker spoke to Curtin. He claimed he was amazed that we would strike in wartime. Ron and Yorky explained the whole story to him and he

5 Theodore was a former Queensland Labor Premier and Federal Treasurer. Frank Packer was the father of Kerry. Theodore and Packer were partners in Australian Consolidated Press, publishers of the *Women’s Weekly*.

said he had never been told anything about it and asked what it would take to get the men back to work. He was told that if he gave his word that he would send an investigating team to the NT to check our claims and do something about the medical situation, we would have the men back at work the next morning; that if he would tell the Army to provide transport we would perhaps have them back sooner.

This was done and at 8 o'clock next morning, all camps were back at work bar one. The men at Nightscliff, who were tunnelling into the cliffs to provide safe storage places, wouldn't go back to work as one of the chaps had scabbed and they demanded that he be sent out of the Territory. The boss wouldn't so they stayed on strike. Yorky and I were taken up in a big staff car and we addressed the meeting. I was first up and I thought that I was very diplomatic and convincing but I got nowhere with them. They weren't going to go back to work with a scab. Yorky Walker then got up and in his usual very blunt manner told them: "You give me the shits, call yourself miners. Don't you know how to get rid of scabs? There is plenty of rocks that can fall and steel that can slip. Ten minutes after you get in that tunnel that scab will be out. Now get to bloody work". There was dead silence for a moment and then someone started to cheer and they went to work. As Yorky had predicted the scab left hurriedly and asked to be taken out. The boss had him put on a convoy and sent south. The Army drivers gave him a tough time on the way.

This strike and the way it was handled made a good impression on the workers. Men who had come from every state in Australia and had not known much about the NAWU now started to become members when their own tickets⁶ ran out. We used to tell them that we recognised their tickets and would represent them in any dispute, but when their tickets ran out they were expected to take a ticket in the NAWU. Most of them thought that was fair enough. We had printed quarterly and half yearly tickets. We had no constitutional right to do this but felt it necessary to,

6 A ticket was a membership card for a specific union.

firstly to get some finance and secondly not to force men to take out a full year ticket if they were leaving in three or four months. It was successful in a mild way and kept us going.

In 1944 we started a campaign to get Yorky Walker out of the CCC and recognised as Acting Secretary of the NAWU. He was doing the job as Secretary and working full time for the CCC and it was starting to get him down. We had a meeting at Pine Creek and decided he should notify the CCC and the Minister of the Interior that as from a certain date he would be resigning from the CCC and becoming full time Secretary of the NAWU. The heads of the CCC in the NT notified him that they would charge him with about six charges if he didn't continue to turn up for work. The charges carried penalties that meant about 12 months gaol. Yorky's reply was that he really needed a holiday and that 12 months would be about long enough. We, that is the members of the Executive and union reps, started to organise like mad and were soon able to notify the CCC heads that the day they took our Secretary to court was the day that all work would stop. We were able to do this very successfully and the day that Walker appeared in answer to the charges in the Darwin Court the Legal Officer for the CCC told him that all charges had been dropped and they and the Minister of the Interior and the Minister of the Army would recognise him and the NAWU. We had the men back at work as soon as we could get the word down the track to the camps and jobs.

At the next meeting of the Executive it was decided that I be appointed Organiser for the union and take up duties as soon as possible, which meant getting out of the CCC where I was a grader driver stationed at Katherine. However the word got around and one day I was given a movement order and with "my" grader was put on a low-loader for Alice Springs, to have repairs done to the grader. Just before leaving one of the clerks in the Katherine office called me aside and told me that the movement order contained an instruction to the Alice Springs office to keep me there and send me out putting in station roads etc; in effect keep me out of circulation. Somehow that instruction was mislaid on the road

down to the Alice and as soon as I was issued with another grader I was on my way back to Katherine. There was great surprise amongst the heads but it wasn't long before another ploy. When I had been conscripted into the CCC I was already working on the East-West part of the road and when they were taking down personal particulars I had given my home town as Rockhampton in Queensland. It wasn't, but I had picked it out as the place to go for a holiday. Now the heads suddenly discovered that I was overdue for two weeks holiday. I had to go. As quickly as possible I turned over my union work to some staunch union reps in a number of camps, such as Dave Chalmers at Daly Waters, Jim Galliano at Mataranka, Jim Watts at Katherine. I only had to worry about the CCC camps as the railways were firmly in the hands of Bob Anthony, Jack Meaney and Jimmy Quinn.

When I finished off my holiday in Rockhampton I had to go to the local CCC Personnel Officer, a joker named Heinze, to get my movement order to Marlborough as a fettler on the railway line. I refused to go and called his attention to John Curtin's policy that skilled men must be so used so that their skills would be of benefit to the country. I was a Plant Operator, which was skilled occupation. I could handle practically any kind of road making equipment. I told him that I would come back in a week and see what he had for me. When I did he was nearly foaming at the mouth. He said that he had a job as a plant operator for me, looking after an air compressor at Biloela.⁷ I again refused and told him that the plant I had operated had either wheels or tracks on them. He then told me that he had been instructed by the head personnel officer at Alice Springs that I was not to be sent back to the NT and showed me the telegram that he had got. I then requested him to discharge me as unfit for heavy duties as I had a crook lung. He sent me up to the Government Doctor, a Dr Gordon, and after he looked at an x-ray of my chest he marked me as fit only for light duties. I took this back to this Heinze and was discharged

⁷ Biloela is in central Qld, 145km south-west of Rockhampton: the point is that this job would keep him out of the Territory and unable to organise for the union.

from the CCC.

I managed to get on a train and get to Townsville and after a bit of organising got on a train for Mt Isa. I saw an engineer named Marsh there, he was from the NT and I had always got on OK with him. I asked him for a job as a Grader Driver and he said he couldn't give me one straight away but as soon as one was available it would be mine. In the meantime I could go to a camp near Camoweal and work as a truck driver while I was waiting. I did this and after about three months this Engineer came through again, and told me that he had been instructed not to give me a job in the NT. I left this job (as I had been marked as fit only for light duties I couldn't be manpowered) and went to Camoweal and after a few days had organised a ride on a convoy to Katherine. I kept out of sight of the Officer in charge of the convoy, but somebody must have blabbed. As soon as I got to Katherine I was picked up by two Provos and placed on a convoy for Mt Isa. I knew the driver of the semi-trailer I was on and when we got close to Newcastle Waters I told him that I was going to leave him. There was a bit of a bend in the road and he steadied down and said that he wouldn't know where I had left the vehicle.

I threw my swag into the bushes and followed it. After the convoy had passed I walked up to Newcastle Waters and told my old friend Maxie Schober, the store-keeper hotel-keeper what it was all about. He was one of the real old timers and would do anything for the union. He arranged a job for me with a droving plant as a cook and we left the next day. I had rung Yorky Walker up in Darwin and he came down the next day and followed us out the Murrniji track until he was held up by water and then walked about three mile to where we had camped for the night. He tried to convince me that I should leave the job and come back with him to Darwin, and the union would fight for the right to employ me as an organiser. I couldn't agree with him that it would be a successful fight and I thought it would do the Union harm at that stage as I would be taken straight out of the NT as it was still under Army control, and they would be fighting to get me back, not keep me there. And besides if I was going

to be an organiser for the bottom end of the NT, which included nearly all the station country, I had better get some experience of it.

I had been a ringer⁸ before the war and had done some droving with sheep and some cooking but never with a pack-horse plant with cattle. I finished droving the day the war ended. We rode into Camowéal after delivering the cattle at Moorstone and was in time to hear Atlee⁹ speaking. I got a lift through to Tennant Creek the next day and then a lift through to Darwin the following day, and was then appointed Organiser for the NAWU from Maranboy to the South Australian border and the WA to the Queensland border. I promised to give it at least twelve months but asked the union to keep their eyes out for someone to take my place. The union hadn't been very active as a union since before the war in the southern end of the NT or on the stations, and it was hard sledding for some time getting the union accepted again. Fortunately there generally was an old timer in each town or camp who was a unionist to the backbone and would always back up a union organiser.

Jimmy Williams became the Organiser for the Top End, from Katherine to Darwin. He left after about six months, and Frank Whiteoak became the Top End Organiser and remained for about two years before he gave it up and went back to the wharf.

After the war finished the war controls still hung on in the NT to everyone's annoyance and bureaucrats continued their mad way. The first of a number of settling down strikes started about this time. The Works & Housing Department decided that they would charge the men for their meals and accommodation and put the price of two pounds ten shillings on it.¹⁰ The union immediately called a strike and demanded that meals and accommodation be free as they were during the war. I had the job of

8 Ringer: shearer, the fastest or lead shearer.

9 Clement Atlee was leader of the British Labour Party during the war, and Prime Minister 1945-51.

10 By comparison, the minimum ("basic") wage for men in 1946 was £5 5s. Of course wages were higher in Darwin.

keeping all the camps from Maranboy to Alice Springs in line and I did some pretty long trips very fast to do so. We won the “blue”¹¹ partially; meals and accommodation were supplied at one pound one shilling, which remained until late 1951.

Then there was the Great Beer Strike. During the war we had been given a ration of two bottles of beer a week (not all the time), and in 1946 Cashmans got a load of beer on one of the first boats to bring civilian goods up. He wanted to charge three shillings and sixpence a bottle,¹² hot, and you took it away to drink. A broad strike committee was set up and a black ban was placed on all beer unless it was sold at the pre-war price of two shillings a bottle. Pickets were set up under their captains and it lasted six weeks before Cashman gave in. Imagine that in a place like the NT where the blokes hadn’t had a drink-up for years! Some of the moves to break the strike deserved to be on films. After a about a month of the strike, Cashman or some of his employees tried a sure fire method, so they thought. Hornibrooks’ old camp had been taken over by the union to house about a hundred single men, and every day some of these men used to walk up past the union office and through the long grass to the mess in Cavanagh St for their meals.

Two of the thirstiest men in Darwin were old Jack Lloyd and Tommy Heath. Their skins were fairly cracking but they were also two of the very staunchest unionists in the NT. This particular day as old Jack and Tommy were going up for their meal they discovered, strategically placed along the path that they had to follow, bottles of plonk, gin, beer etc. Their eyes bulged out of their heads. They carefully gathered it together and sat down to decide what to do with it. One said, “we will take it and hide it until the strike is over”; the other said, “we wouldn’t you know, we would sneak away and drink it and that would be the start of the end of the strike”. They looked at it a bit longer, then old Jack said with

11 Blue: dispute.

12 Approximately \$8. A shilling in 1946 would be equivalent to \$2.30 in 2003; There were twelve pence to a shilling, so sixpence was half a shilling.

great sorrow in his voice, “the spirit would be willing but the flesh would be weak,” and he started smashing the bottles. Tommy joined in and when they had finished, with their backs a little straighter, they went up and reported to the Strike Committee. From that day onwards the committee knew that they would win, and they did.

After, when the Clubs and Pubs became a regular thing again in Darwin, ships beer was three shillings a bottle and overland beer was 4 shillings. When draught beer became available an 11 ounce glass was a shilling, all spirits were a shilling a nip except for Scotch which was 1/6d. This remained the same when I left in 51.

The next strike of any size was the Silver Seal Strike. This Silver Seal mob were disposal speculators, taking advantage of the stores built up during the war and now to be disposed of to the advantage of people with big money and a pull with some of the disposal officers. Silver Seal had got in early and amongst other things had bought 100,000 drums of petrol, diesel, oils etc, that had been stacked at different places around the NT, for one shilling a drum. They had also bought a vehicle park for peanuts. The disposal officers would gather a park of vehicles together and then call for buyers; the buyers would have a meeting and would decide who was to get it for how much. They bid for the whole park. You couldn't go in and buy a single vehicle; you had to buy from the big speculators after they had bought the park, and you paid through the nose for it. Silver Seal bought 1000 vehicles, over half of them good goers and it cost them about five thousand quid¹³ for them, or five pounds a vehicle (plus what they slung the joker in charge). The union had a letter from Frank Forde, Minister for the Army, giving us the OK to purchase one of the vehicles in this park. The officer in charge tried to hold out on us but finally had to obey Forde's letter. The vehicle cost us two hundred and forty quid. The next day Silver Seal got all the vehicles in the park, some 3000, for approximately five quid each.

13 Quid: pound (money).

We had a team of men working for Silver Seal at well over the new award. They had to get the vehicles in shape to make the long trip to Adelaide or Brisbane. The method of travel was to piggy back small trucks up on the back of larger trucks or place the front end of large trucks up on the back of other trucks, as the drivers had to have travel allowances, return fares, besides overtime and a bonus for delivery. The men were doing OK but were only staying OK because the union rep kept a very close watch on payments etc. There would be a dispute every payday over short payment of allowances, overtime etc. Finally as labour became more available as young soldiers were discharged, Silver Seal decided that it was time to make a change.

They started by sacking the union rep. The union's reaction was to demand that he be reinstated. They refused and all the men walked out. Silver Seal had a team of young soldiers who had just been discharged lined up to take their place. These young fellows felt that they were on top of the world. They hadn't had a job before they were conscripted and here they were being paid up to 25 quid a week and free tucker and accommodation. We went down and talked to them, pointing out that they were being used by the company to try and break down the union conditions etc. They refused to take any notice of the union. The Union had to take very [strong] action, and a few nights later these young, would-be scabs found themselves on a convoy going south after getting a belting. They kept going. Silver Seal had to come to the party again and reinstate all the men and pay for the time lost. While they remained in the NT they never tried anything again.

Qantas had set up a large camp at Berrimah and Frank Whiteoak got it organised and was getting the conditions fixed up a bit at a time. That was really the only way to work it as it being a semi-government authority they were really more bureaucratic than a government department under the control of a Minister. Everything was going along OK and the organiser reckoned that within six months the conditions would be better than the old established jobs. However things took a

dramatic turn. An ex-organiser, from a big union in the south, got a job with Qantas and decided he would fix things up in a very short time. Against the advice of the union officials he pulled a strike and placed the union in a position where they had to go along with it. Qantas dismissed the strikers and flew up a large bunch of scabs and broke the strike after six weeks. The union never really got back the coverage it once had. After the scabs had served their purpose and left and new men came up they were generally signed up in Sydney in a public service association. We were only able to maintain a small number of real unionists there.

Before the Qantas strike was pulled, I had come up to Darwin to report to the executive on the union's progress in the southern end. Among the numerous matters reported on was the conditions of the workers at the Government Batteries at Tennant Creek. These Batteries crushed all the ore from the small miners in the area. The Mining Award had not been touched since 1937 and as such the rates and conditions were way behind present conditions. We had drafted an agreement to bring the rates and conditions up to date and the mine owners had agreed to it and signed up. But the two batteries, being under the control of the Mines Department, which in turn was under the control of the Minister of the Interior, the usual run-around took place.

I got the agreement of the Executive that I could close the batteries down, but that I would have to look after the men as far as tucker went out of the slender resources of the Tennant Creek area. I would also have to get the sympathetic understanding of the small miners who would be without the batteries to crush their ore. This of course was before we had any indication that a loud mouth was going to put us in an impossible position at Qantas. When I got back to Tennant Creek I had a talk with a number of small miners and got an assurance that they would give support to the battery workers and protest to the Minister about the rates and conditions which were not up to the standard of the agreement that they had signed. The battery workers came out on strike but stayed at the batteries and used the facilities there. We had set up a committee to feed

the men and a voluntary levy of a pound a week was agreed to from all the workers in the area. This was enough to feed the two strike camps.

This strike also lasted six weeks. Then the government decided that they would have a Conciliation Commissioner come up and hear the claims. He did and told the Mines Department to sign the agreement which then became the award. At this time I was doing all the industrial cases for the union. I had done the first one in Adelaide in December 1945 before Chief Conciliation Commissioner Rowlands and caused a bit of a stir. All the clothes I had were sweat shirts, shorts, and sandals. Rowlands told me that I had to be correctly dressed to appear in court, so he lent me a tie, and his sports coat. As he was a man of about 20 stone [130 kg] and over six feet [180cm] tall, how they reckoned I was correctly dressed I could never make out.

Early in 46 the first of the Aboriginal strikes took place. I can't remember the date now, but it was after the first strike that took place on the wharf. I had come up from the Centre to report, which I generally did about every four months, and was sitting in the union office when I heard a stone drop on the roof. I had a look around and couldn't see any kids about. A little later I heard another one on the roof so I figured that I had better take a better look. As I walked all around the buildings and at the back I heard the familiar sound "Eh", the sound that an Aborigine makes when he wants to get your attention. I walked over to some long grass and hidden there were seven Aborigines. They told me that they wanted to talk to the union about striking. They wanted assistance and advice what to do. As I am tone deaf I have great difficulty in translating broken English and they had to keep repeating what they were saying. I told them to hold on and went back to the union office. Frank Whiteoak, the Darwin Organiser, was there so I told him about it and took him back down. Some of them knew him and he was the bloke they had really come to see. They were too polite to tell me that they didn't know me. Frank took over and formed a strike committee with himself as adviser in the background. I still have a photo of this first strike committee with

Frank.

At that time male Aborigines were brought in from the tribes to do the work around town and provide labour for the “silver tails”—public servants and their wives. The male got six shillings a week and one meal a day for doing all the outside work around the house and garden, cleaning and burning the “Flaming Fury”.¹⁴ The female did all the inside work; all the washing, ironing, looking after the children, all the house work and got 4 shillings a week and one meal a day. They were kept in Bagot Compound and Berrimah Compound and were brought into town each morning by truck and taken back in the evening. They were not allowed in town after dark except on Saturday nights for the pictures. They cleaned the streets and cut the grass etc. They told Frank what they wanted in a series of meetings and if I remember rightly it amounted to an increase in wages, more and better clothes and blankets, etc.

They set a day for the strike to start and it did. There were no scabs. After a couple of weeks the “silver tails” got so tired of looking at a mountain of unwashed clothing etc, that the Administration gave in. They got the “magnificent” sum of two pounds a week and better food, more clothes and blankets. They were very happy. The union told them that they had to organise again and get better wages and conditions and a school for the children. Later they did this and got a school up to fourth grade. These things happened while I was down the southern end and I was kept informed by Yorky Walker, the Secretary, and through the columns of the *Northern Standard*, the union’s newspaper, which had got going again.

We had got the machinery back from the Army and two of the old staff turned up and we were very lucky in getting a really good Linotype operator from Brisbane. Yorky became Editor, in addition to his other duties as Secretary. The paper started off at eight pages and worked its

14 Flaming fury: A toilet constructed over a pit, the contents of which are periodically doused with oil and burnt; common at the time in the Northern Territory.

way up to sixteen every Friday. Besides we had done a fair amount of printing.

We had ten employees—two organisers, the secretary and a girl bookkeeper. Keeping staff such as an editor was hard. After Walker left in 47 I managed to get Ron Haas from Brisbane. He stayed twelve months and then I got “Smacker” McCarthy from Brisbane. He stayed six months. Then I got Ron Brown and he stayed over two years. They were all good men in their way, very dedicated, but more suited for the cities than Darwin and the NT which at this time still had a character of its own that had to be understood. Otherwise the Territorians didn’t understand them.

Some cases that the union ran on behalf of individual members around this time greatly helped build up the status of the union amongst its members. First was the case on behalf of Ted Styles, who had been wrongly classified, underpaid, not paid allowances, for some two years by the Department of the Interior. I took the case before a Board of Reference at Alice Springs and as expected, the Advocate for the department claimed no case could be heard because the Statute of Limitations (then 9 months) had run out. I knew that this was to be the defence and I attacked on the basis that no government could put forward such a defence to get out of paying what was due, especially when it was guilty, knew it was guilty, and was seeking to defraud a man of his just wages by a legal technicality. The magistrate, who was Chairman of the Board of Reference, agreed with me and also became really indignant himself at the attitude of the department. He found in the union’s favour.

The advocate for the department said to me after, “You know the old man’s mad, we’ll appeal against his verdict.” I told him that I would bet him a dozen of beer that we would get the money. He said “done”. A year later he paid up. It took a full year writing to the minister and asking the ACTU to intervene. Finally I got a letter from the minister agreeing to pay the amount claimed—£668, some shillings¹⁵—and enclosed the

15 This was a colossal sum of money at the time: enough to buy a house in the suburbs of Melbourne or Sydney.

cheque. We had it photographed and placed on the front page of the *Northern Standard* newspaper with the caption, "Unionism Pays". Another claim settled for wrongful classification and underpayment of wages that helped to get the union respected in the Southern end was a claim against Banka Banka station, for underpayment of a driver of a cattle transport. He was being paid under the Pastoral Award. That would have been all right, only he was also carrying back loading for stations and towns along the way back. I claimed that he must be paid at the much higher rate of the Works & Housing Award. After a hearing before the Chairman of the Board of Reference, the Chairman advised the station owner to confer with the union and make a settlement. These claims caused a large number of employers to ask the union to confer with them as they had no wish to go to court or have a stoppage on their hands.

The union was quite busy in the Top End during this time. Quite a number of men had been made redundant from different jobs at the finish of the war and they had no place to have meals or sleep. As they wanted to remain in the Territory something had to be done to assist them. The first thing was to find them accommodation and a place that was ready-made was Hornibrooks' old camp. As the huts were empty the union took them over and placed a large number of men in them and set up a committee to run them. Then the union went to the Administration and after a lot of argument got them made over to the union. The rent was 12/- a week for the lot.

Then the necessity of providing meals became apparent. There wasn't even a café or a store to buy things, except the Army ration stores. There were a number of large store sheds in Cavanagh St and it was decided that they would be good to set up a kitchen and provide meals for the men.

In letters to me, the Secretary, Yorky Walker, told me of how they got the buildings, two of them. A deputation led by the Secretary went and saw the Administrator, Charles Lydiard Aubrey Abbott, very vice-regal. They put it to him, but he refused to allow them to use the sheds.

They notified him that if that was his attitude, it left them no option but to take the sheds. This they set out to do and as they were attempting to open the door with a piece of four by two timber, a car containing the Commander of Norforce came past. He stopped and came over. Being a naval person his approach was rather strange to the chaps present. He said, "I say, my man, what are you doing?" As Yorky was not his man he retorted, "we are opening this bloody door, my man." He must have got the hint because he changed his tone a bit. He asked why, and as it was a good question, it got a good answer. He was quite interested and when he found out that many of the men would be unloading his ships, he suggested that the Secretary came down to his office and he would make over the buildings to them, for as he said, "The Yanks built them and when they left they gave them to me. That makes them mine. Now I'll make them over to you and that will make them yours." Quite a refreshing change from the usual run of bureaucrats. They went down to his office and he called in his writer and made over the buildings to the union. The Administrator had to get in on the deal, as of course the sheds didn't belong to the Navy, they belonged to the Administration, so they charged the union rent for the sheds, 12/- a week if I remember correctly.

The union went ahead and opened up one of the sheds and made the necessary alterations. There was plenty of voluntary labour to do everything. Some had trucks and they were sent down to recently vacated camps and stoves, tables, stools, cooking gear, eating gear, even cold rooms were put to use again. The tucker was only Army rations cooked up until better supplies were available. The other shed was earmarked for a Workers Club. When the rules could be drawn up and the necessary funds collected, members put in what they could as loans and in the first half of the year 46 the Workers Club was registered and obtained a licence. I was one of the foundation members, and before I left the NT did a stint as barman there. Beside the club, the union built the stadium, which besides being used for a while as a fight venue, was the meeting place for the union, pick-up place for the wharfies, and basketball court for the town teams. The union social committee used to hold many

concerts there, ably assisted by the many artists amongst the community. These concerts and socials were mainly held to collect finance for some good cause, such as the Leprosarium Committee, children's playgrounds, etc.

Early in 47 I got a letter from Yorcky Walker asking me to come to Darwin urgently. He didn't explain why, perhaps thinking that I would not have come if he had. When I got to Darwin he told me that he was finished and was leaving the NT the following week for Melbourne and that I would have to take over as Acting Secretary. This came like a bombshell. I had agreed when appointed organiser, to stay for twelve months. I had been there now nearly two years and didn't wish to make a career out of union work. Firstly I didn't consider that I had the necessary qualifications to make a union official and all that meant in the NT where there was not assistance available and everything depended on the Union Secretary. And secondly I didn't have much education. I had been forced to leave school at 14 years of age, and only for a travelling scholarship for nine years in the University of Hard Knocks (carrying my swag) I would be as dumb as any 14 year old at the age of thirty. However it was impressed on me that I had to do the job because there was nobody else.

I had never been in an office doing office work, overseeing a newspaper and printery. I not only taught myself to do Arbitration Court work, but even taught myself to type, as when Yorcky left he took the typist-bookkeeper with him. They had got married some time before this; she was the daughter of Percy Laidler¹⁶ of Melbourne. I managed to get an editor in Ron Haas from Brisbane and a bookkeeper office girl also from Brisbane, but she couldn't type. There was a portable typewriter and I had to start the old hunt and peck system, and, with some difficulty, teach the typewriter to spell. It meant that I had to do all the

16 Percy Laidler (1884-1958) was a long-standing Melbourne bookseller and socialist, prominent in the Victorian Socialist Party, the Industrial Workers of the World, and then in founding the Communist Party of Australia. He remained active on the left into the 1950s. His story is told in his daughter, Bertha Walker's book, *Solidarity Forever* (1972).

correspondence, and what was worse do all the Awards over. There wasn't one that was later than 1940, and a lot of water had flowed under the bridge since then.

I started with the Works and Service award, which had about 120 classifications in it and most of the workers at that time came under it. As we would be dealing with government departments, I decided that the only way was to get the "Heads" to realise that, unless they came to an agreement with the union to have the case heard swiftly, there would be no work done. We only had one organiser after I went to the office. Later on we managed to get another one, so Frank Whiteoak and myself used to hold breakfast-time meetings, dinner-time meetings and night-time meetings and tell the members what we proposed and get advice and suggestions from them.

When we had talked to the great majority of them, we approached the "heads" for a conference on our "log of claims". We got knocked back as we expected, so we sent the word around and the members struck and in Darwin marched up to the Works & Housing. The Director and the Deputy Director were reasonable chaps and were only carrying departmental instructions and they assured us that they would advise their "heads" to have a conference with us over the log of claims. They did and we had the conference in Darwin, with the Director and his Deputy sitting in as advisors. We got a very firm agreement on the log of claims, but we still had to go to court in Melbourne to get them OK'd.

Sometime before this we had got agreement with Dr Evatt¹⁷ that he would appoint a Conciliation Commissioner solely for the NT. He appointed a chap from WA but he refused to come when he found that he would have to travel to the NT quite a bit, so he appointed Portus to deal with NT Awards. Portus also had the job of dealing with other awards in other states, so he rarely came to the NT and 95% of all cases were heard

17 Presumably in Dr Evatt's capacity as Federal Attorney-General, a position he held while also Minister for External Affairs in the Curtin and Chifley governments, 1941-49.

in Melbourne or Adelaide or sometimes Sydney. As there were some dozen awards that had to be redrafted, put to the members, redrafted again, served on the respondents and the Industrial Registrar, and then handled at a conference and pushed through the courts, my time was more than just taken up.

It usually meant starting the day early and holding breakfast-time meetings at camps, sometimes up to fifty miles from Darwin, then back to Darwin and do office work and correspondence, and look after complaints all day. After tea it was back to the office and work on the log of claims until the wharfies knocked off at midnight. Their bus always pulled up outside the union office and one or two would drop in and put the hot water jug on and make a billy of tea, after which I would go home. This would usually be about 1 o'clock. This intensive work, and at the same time teaching myself how to do the court work etc, started to get me down.

To give an example of how you got treated by some of the court bureaucrats, one of the first logs of claims that I ever sent to the Industrial Registrar was returned with a curt note saying that it was incorrect. No where, why, or how, it was incorrect, just that it was. I went over it very carefully, couldn't find anything wrong as far as I knew, so got the proof reader for the newspaper to go over it. He couldn't find anything wrong, so I sent it back again. After about a fortnight it was returned with another curt note saying it was incorrect; no further information. I wrote the gentleman? and asked where it was incorrect. No reply.

After a month of waiting I sent a copy to Jack McPhillips of the Ironworkers Union and asked him to let me know where it was wrong. All he could find that this gentleman? could be possibly be objecting to was that the log of claims wasn't bound together with green ribbon. So I tried that and he received it and fixed a date for the hearing. I got on to Dr Evatt and made a complaint to him about the stupid set up and got a sympathetic answer. Some action must have been taken because I never

ever again bound a log of claims with a green ribbon or any other kind. This same Registrar held up our change of rules for years. Instead of trying, he was to our way of thinking, deliberately obstructionist.

We had a number of attempts to get Award wages for Aborigines but always came up against the backward policy of the Native Affairs Department which, even though there was a Labor government in office, continued to make and carry out a policy that was not many years away from the slave days. In many cases it was no better than the slave days. These people called themselves “protectors”. If they had been truthful they would have called themselves by their proper name, “persecutors”. They were racists and carried out a racist policy, carried it out for the benefit of the employers, mainly the cattle station owners. This is now history, but a history that is being covered up with a lot of whitewash. I suppose that the history of the NAWU could be part of the history of the development of the Aborigines’ struggle for their place as people and all that means. We did as much as we could with the means available to us, which was very little.

Union tickets those days were 25/- a year until 1948, then 40/- a year. It was very hard to get dedicated people to work as organisers. They got £9 a week and no expenses, while they could get £15 a week, plus allowances, as a truck driver. They had to live in their swags; no hotel beds for them. They got most of their meals at the camps they visited and most of the petrol for their vehicles also. It wasn’t until 49 that a motion was pushed through the union to pay the Secretary and the organisers twelve pounds a week. No mention was made about other expenses. It went without saying that expenses were to be kept to a minimum, and they were. It was the usual thing for an organiser to be away for three months and do perhaps 15 thousand miles and put in an expense account for under ten pounds.

The union just didn’t have the money. It couldn’t have carried on the work it did if the newspaper hadn’t carried part of the expenses by buying vehicles, paying an organiser-reporter and paying a rental to the

union for the use of the machinery to do the printing on. But we were always short of money for the things we could see wanted doing. The most members we ever had while I was there was in 1951 when we had 2504 members.

The union helped in the struggle of the Indonesian people.¹⁸ When the Dutch ships came into Darwin to be refuelled, they weren't and that's where they stopped for quite a while. Numbers of Indonesian people were sent to Darwin by the government to wait until it was safe for them to go back to their homes. Dr Evatt used to either ring the union or write and ask us to look after them. We got numbers of them jobs while they were waiting.

Then when Streeter & Male, the pearling people, came to Darwin and used it as their base during their pearling operations, they had indentured natives of Indonesia to work their boats and do the diving. We disagreed with this policy and demanded that they employ Aborigines and train them for the job and pay them proper award rates. We got no help from the Native Affairs Department, so when the company used some indentured labour ashore during the wet, we were able to take action, as indentured labour could only be used on ship. Once they came ashore and worked they had to be paid full award rates. That year, the May Day parade was led by over 200 Aborigines, who had just won a strike of their own, and the crews of the pearling luggers. We had given them pride of place for the struggles they had taken part in and they were very proud. We were proud of them.

The government decided to take into account the desires of the people of the NT for a say in their government and set up the NT

18 When the Japanese military conquered Indonesia, then called the Dutch East Indies, in 1942, the Dutch colonial administration escaped to Australia. After the war, they attempted to reimpose colonial control, but a mass Indonesian nationalist movement rose up to take control of the country for themselves, and keep the Dutch from returning. Australian trade unionists played a major role in stopping the Dutch from returning. The story is told in Rupert Lockwood's book, *Black Armada* (1975).

Legislative Council. It was very undemocratic—six elected members and eight appointed ones, plus the Administrator who was the President of the Council with a vote. We had three people elected who represented the broad union policy and made the debates a bit interesting instead of being just a rubber stamp.

About this time we managed to get Judge Kirby up to hear a claim for the Basic Wage. In unity with the Amalgamated Engineering Union (AEU), we had worked gathering and preparing evidence to place before him. We finished up with an unbeatable case for some £17 a week. At the time the wage was about £9 pound a week. It was February and really humid. The judge came into court, dressed in his wig and gown, and had a look at us jokers. We were dressed in shorts, sweat shirts and sandals. Before he could sit down I went up and asked him could I speak privately to him. He hesitated for a moment and then motioned me back to his quarters. I told him that he would finish up as a bucket of sweat if he tried to sit out the day dressed like that, and that we were very informal up here, and dressed for the country. There wasn't even a fan for the room, although we got two small ones later. He agreed with me and disrobed. I picked up two small towels and took them out and when he sat down I gave them to him and told him to place them under his elbows to catch the sweat. He must have thought I was a valet. We started the case about 10.30am, and I had the job of opening up our case. I spoke for about two hours presenting our case and by that time everyone was getting pretty thirsty.

The Judge called and adjourned until 2pm. I told him that we were all going over for a drink and invited him to have a beer. He said, "We may as well continue to be informal," and came over to the Vic Hotel with us. Beer had been in very short supply and I had been very surprised to hear that the Vic had beer. Danny Holden, a well known character, was the barman, and he had just put four glasses on the bar and started to open the bottles. Harold Souter, the AEU Advocate, didn't drink and called for a squash. Danny poured the beers and we all took a mouthful

and promptly spat it out. Beer has got too bad when you couldn't drink it in Darwin those days. This wasn't only bad beer it was bloody awful. It was called Red Castle and was brewed (or something) in Geraldton WA. Nobody could drink it and we finished up in George Limb's with a pot of his lemon squash. The case went on for two and a half days and even the opposition's advocate, Ian Pearce, agreed we had a case that couldn't be disputed. The Judge notified us that he would adjourn the case to Adelaide and give his decision the following month. He did, and his decision was to give no decision, but to leave the case of a Basic Wage for the NT until such time until there had been a national inquiry, which of course simply meant that the NT would be held out on the end of a stick and would get only what it could take.

It was usual in those days on the anniversary of the bombing of Darwin, 19 Feb 1942 at 10 minutes to 10am, to hold a service on the wharf for all those wharfies and seamen who had lost their lives. The service was in the form of a short address as union secretary, then the throwing of wreaths into the harbour. In 1948 a number of things took place that caused a bit of talking for quite a while. That morning a Yank luxury cruise ship came into the harbour to be moored. It was the ex yacht of the King of Norway. The tourists had been told by the Administrator that they would be able to see a corroboree out at the Bagot Compound, however the Aborigines were on strike at the time and had decided not to co-operate. The wharfies took the lines and moored the ship, but before they could do anything else, the time had come for the service of Remembrance and they all gathered around on the wharf in front of the bow of the ship and the service went on.

When it was over the wharfies assisted in placing the gangway etc. One of the wharfies was Billy Rowe, a coal black man from Beagle Bay WA. Billy was a well built six footer with a big black beard. When the Yanks came down the gangway, festooned with cameras, binoculars, timing gear, and what have you, they were dressed in Hawaiian shirts with palm trees and canoes and more maidens on the back. When they spotted

Billy they trotted over to him and said, “say guy you are going to go corroboree for us this evening?” Billy roared, “Get away you yankee cock-sucking bastards or I’ll corroboree up and down your guts with both boots.” It was like the retreat from the Philippines.

That evening they were taken out to the compound to see the corroboree but the Aborigines refused. “No more,” they said, “we been on strike”. The Yanks offered them money and their brightly coloured shirts but it made no difference. “We been proper sorry,” they said, “that Administrator not been ask us, he been tell us, and we been on strike.”

The union secretary also used to give the address on behalf of the citizens of Darwin at the town service on this day. It was about this time the town planners came around with their plans for the rebuilding of Darwin, and asked us how many blocks we needed for the Union. We picked out sites for the union office, the printery, the Trades and Labour Council. May Day was always a good turnout in Darwin those days, it used to start from the union office and march through the streets to the park on the Esplanade where after speeches, sports used to take place for the rest of the day. Union Picnic Day in August was another good turnout. It was held at first at Berry Springs, next at Howard Springs, and thereafter down at the Gardens.

One of the Awards we got fixed up in 48 was the Wharf Award. This was a complex matter as the respondent to the Award was the Commonwealth Railways (NT). The railway used to run out on the wharf and they did all the carrying to the Bond Store and so became the employers of labour. Now there was no railway on to the wharf and all the carrying was done by the Lorry Owners Association which was affiliated with the union. We asked the stevedoring company (Burns Philp) to become the respondents. They refused, as they were only acting as agents for the shipping company, which was the Australian Shipping Commission. They also refused, so we asked the Minister for Shipping to accept. He also refused, so we had a meeting and the feeling was all for strike. I finally got them to accept a different method of strike—a go

slow, properly policed, at one ton an hour. Doing one ton an hour was harder than working normally at about ten ton an hour. The Culcairn was the ship that was the unlucky one. The men carried out the go-slow in a very disciplined manner. After one gang had been fined a tenner each, after the normal time of unloading had passed, over three-quarters of the cargo was still aboard.

The Minister of Shipping, Senator Bill Ashby (fix it Bill), gathered a team of so-called experts and came up one Sunday by plane. Being a Labor senator we could have been forgiven for thinking he would have gotten in touch with the union, however the first we knew of their presence was late that afternoon. We found that they had come early and had been met by the Administrator (who was anti-labour even though he was appointed by Labor). With the Manager of Burns Philp they had all gone down to the ship and spent the rest of the day conferring together and deciding on a plan to confront the wharfies with. How stupid they were was shown by ignoring the presence of the two stewards who had to wait on them all day. When their great planning conference was over the stewards got a taxi and came out to my place at Fanny Bay and were able to tell me the whole plot. I gathered the Wharf and Bond Committee together and it was agreed that I would answer the senator and that silence would be the order of the day. No interruptions of the senator's bullshit. This was carried in an excellent manner.

Next morning while the pick-up was progressing, in came the Administrator with four policemen, then came the senator and his experts from shipping and the Stevedoring Industry Board. I as Secretary, and nominal owner of the Stadium, walked over and asked the Administrator did he have a warrant to enter our premises with police. He claimed that the police were there to protect the Minister. I pointed out in a very loud voice that no Labor minister needs protection at a workers' meeting, but that he, as Administrator, would need more than protection if he didn't get out of our premises with his police and stay out until he was invited or had a warrant to enter. He left with his police, but the senator asked could

he come back on his own. Having put him in his place, I agreed and he rejoined the senator's party. I had by this time been informed as to why they had come and introduced to each one, I took them up into the boxing ring and introduced them to the wharfies and informed them that the senator wanted to address them.

The silly old bastard started telling them that they were bludgers etc, just repeating like a parrot what ever the Administrator had told him. When he had finished there was dead silence. I entered the ring and dealt with his speech and showed with facts where he had been told lies. I also pointed out that when Eddie [Ward]¹⁹ was a minister, he had first visited the union to get the union's view first and we thought that was the correct thing for a Labor Minister to do. I then pointed out that he should have known more about bludging than to accuse wharfies of doing it as it was common knowledge that he had run a hazard school²⁰ in Lithgow before entering Parliament. He staggered back against the ropes and I thought he would have a stroke.

I then suggested that the party come down and observe the unloading of the ship and then leave his experts to confer with the union. He had a real expert with him in the person of Reg Reid, who had started as a wharfie, then a foreman, then cargo-supervisor for Patricks. He was on the Australian Shipping Commission etc. After spending some time at the ship and explaining what was going on to the senator, who knew very little about the practical side of unloading a ship, we went back and started our conference.

The Administrator decided that he should be chairman, we put up with him until 5pm and then, as we adjourned, I suggested to Reg Reid that we would get nowhere with such a big conference and such a chairman, and if he would deputise two jokers from his party and with

19 Eddie Ward (1899-1963) was the leading left-wing federal Labor MP, and Minister for Labor, then Minister for Transport and Territories in the Curtin wartime government. Ward's story is told in Elwyn Spratt, *Eddie Ward: Firebrand of East Sydney* (1965)

20 Hazard: A dice game involving gambling.

two union officials we might get somewhere, George Gibbs and myself to represent the Union. George Gibbs was then the Secretary of the Wharf Section of the union and had worked the wharf before the war and had very good knowledge of what we wanted and how we proposed to get it. Next day we met the two negotiators and took them into a small room at the back of the union office where we wouldn't be disturbed. At 5 o'clock that afternoon we had gained every point that we had asked for in our log of claims that could be handled by the negotiators.

The only point that remained to get was perhaps the hardest, our rate on a divisor of 20 hours.²¹ We were lucky, as the union had the early records back to 1936, of the hours worked by each gang, each day, each week and month right up to the time of our log of claims. Darwin was perhaps the first place to have an equalisation scheme for work on the wharf. It was brought in in 1934 and we had the records from 1936 onwards. We were the only party in this present dispute to have any figures at all. "Clicker" White, who was an organiser at the time, had assisted me in going through the old books and getting out the figures of the hours worked. We had spent over a month, working every night from seven till twelve o'clock when we wouldn't be interrupted. We asked Jim Healy, the Federal Secretary of Waterside Workers Federation, to handle the wage and divisor and date of starting before the court for us and he agreed. He expressed some surprise at our hourly claims and divisor claims as we were well ahead of the WWF rates and below the WWF divisor. However in briefing letters to him we were able to convince him that our claims were good.

He took the claims before Judge Kirby, who was at that time dealing with the wharf claims all over Australia. Kirby first objected to our high claims but Healy produced our figures and the opposition couldn't dispute them, they didn't have any figures of time worked. Kirby blew them up and granted our claims. He refused to make it retrospective, so when Jim

²¹ The divisor was the number of hours a wharfie had to work to earn an agreed weekly rate.

Healy wired us that our wage rates were to be 6/- per hour and our divisor was to be 20 the wharfies were very happy. At a meeting with them we managed to get them to carry on the go-slow campaign to win the retrospective part of our claims. The general opinion was that we couldn't win it, but after only ten days the government agreed to pay retrospectively. Jim Healy was sent a case of pipes as a mark of thanks for his work on our behalf. We had always worked closely with the WWF even when the groupers²² were in the majority on the Federal Council and sent Jim Healy up to Darwin to take over the wharf. He agreed with us that fragmentation of the NAWU would only weaken all sections, and reported back to the Federal Council that as the Wharf Section of the NAWU would always work hand in hand with the WWF that it be left as it was.

The first big attempt to body snatch members from the NAWU came when we were rebuilding the union in the late months of 43. During the strike for medical attention we got information that the Australian Workers Union (AWU) had sent an organiser up to the NT just before the strike, and he was laying low until he thought the time was right to make his move. He was staying with the personnel officer and getting a lot of information from them about different people he could expect to get assistance from, and ones he could expect resistance from, as he had been an organiser in Queensland for the AWU. I got in touch with Mick Healy, who was Secretary of the Trades & Labour Council in Brisbane, and asked him to send me any information he could get on the gentleman. Mick sent me a cutting from the *Townsville Register* and the Griffith paper from the NSW Irrigation Area. These were two of the places where he had been organiser for the AWU.

22 Supporters of the anti-communist industrial "groups" in the trade union movement. As part of the cold war, they took control of several key unions, such as the Federated Ironworkers, the Federated Clerks Union, and the Shop Assistants' union, their remaining stronghold in 2003. For a short period in the late 1940s and early 1950s, the industrial groups had a strong presence in the Waterside Workers Federation, gaining the position of Melbourne Branch Secretary, and in 1950, a right-wing Federal President.

He started his career as a body snatcher in the NT at our camp at Snake Creek, and the committee agreed to call a meeting and have the men hear him. He gave the usual spiel about the “grand old union” and how they would get all sort of things for us if we would only buy their tickets. After he had finished I got up to reply to him and after giving the history of why and how the NAWU had broken away from the AWU, I quoted from the *Townsville Register*. “After the finish of the great sugar strike over Weils Disease, a mass meeting of canecutters and mill hands had branded one F Scholls, AWU organiser as a procurer of scabs and agent of the boss”. He couldn’t and didn’t deny that he was the person referred to but tried to use the old bogey, “that’s a commie paper”. Unfortunately for him everyone knew that the *Townsville Register* was just the opposite. I then told the meeting that the AWU had then transferred him to Griffith in NSW and quoted from the Griffith paper that a mass meeting of the area members of the AWU had declared no confidence in the said organiser and demanded he be removed. He was, and here he was; so what is the meeting’s wishes that we do with him? In the main the wishes were that he be dropped in the nearest hole and covered over as he stank. He left the NT after that as every camp he went to had a copy of the report of the Snake Creek meeting, and they gave him a very hot reception.

Then we had the Transport Workers Union (TWU) send an organiser up to try and sign members. He made his first appearance at Katherine. He contacted our union reps “Wild” Bill Donnelly and Scotty McLean. They agreed to call a meeting so he could be heard. It was one of the biggest meetings held at Katherine for the Works and Service workers, and after they had listened to him, the chairman accepted a motion that he be chucked to the crocodiles in the river. He left in a hurry and went south that night on a convoy. Later another one was sent by the TWU from Queensland and with the help of a traitor on the Executive of the NAWU managed to sign up a number of members at K40, one of the large Works and Housing camps, we heard that he was going to hold a

meeting on a certain night and would have as his bodyguard the traitor executive member, one “lucky” Leichhardt (Lechliutner) who had only just missed out as the Australian heavyweight boxer to go to the Olympic Games.

Jack Meaney, Treasurer of the union, and myself went [and] called a meeting a little earlier and told them we wished to challenge this body snatcher. We explained to the meeting that in Queensland, the TWU left their members north of Rockhampton to the tender mercies of the AWU, so why were they coming to the NT at this time? They had never been here in the past, and we had pretty good information that they were here to do a job for the employers and attempt to smash the NAWU. We asked the members that had signed up with the TWU to get in touch with the TWU organiser and his bodyguard and tell them to come out and face our accusations. They did and nobody turned up. After waiting about an hour they tried again and still nobody turned up, so we went on with the meeting and all but one of the chaps that had signed up with the TWU rejoined the NAWU. The one exception was leaving for NSW the following week so we let him go. That for the time being took care of the body snatchers.

One important strike that took place on the railways in 45 was the Bank-to-Bank strike that was centred at Katherine. The men working the line were required to travel any distance to start work and also to come home in their own time. They demanded that they start and finish at their camp. The Railway refused to allow this and the strike lasted three weeks before the strike committee got in touch with the minister and persuaded him to intervene and grant the Bank-to-Bank. Jack Meaney, Bob Anthony, Jimmy Quinn and Jack McGuinness were the leaders of this strike.

In 1948 we also had the long hospital strike; it lasted six weeks. We had served a log of claims on the Public Service Board for the Hospital Employees Section of the Union, and what the Board granted was thought to be very poor. We appealed to the Board for a hearing and were refused, so we gave notice that unless we were given a hearing by a certain

date all labour would be withdrawn. There was no response from the Board so when the date had expired, all labour was withdrawn and then the screams were heard. The union was called every name that distorted minds could think up. Even the Minister of Health got in the act. He hadn't bothered to reply to our letters to him before the strike but he had plenty to say after his silence had brought about the strike. The union was able to pay a small strike pay to the members after the first fortnight.

Wonderful solidarity was shown by the Aboriginal workers to the union. The "silver tail" women decided to try their hands at strike breaking and attempted to go to the hospital, but first the picket line was a bit too much for them and secondly the Aboriginal workers that were doing all their house work, walked out, when "their employers" tried to scab. As soon as the "silver tails" found that there was nobody at home to do all the dirty work, they quickly turned tail and went home. Then the Aboriginal workers, having taught their "white masters" a small lesson also returned to work. After six weeks and the intervention of the Minister of Labour, a hearing was granted and the employees returned to work. At the hearing, we were successful in 95% of our log of claims.

The publicity that this strike and others received in southern papers caused the groupers and the employers to decide that they must make a concerted effort to smash the union by getting rid of the Union leaders and from about this time onwards a number of groupers were sent or brought up to the NT and went to work for the employers.

During 1948 we also had the Hotel and Restaurant Award made applicable to all workers south of Tennant Creek. Up till then it had only applied to all workers from Darwin to Tennant Creek, and employees south of Tennant Creek were just paid what the employer liked. Girls working in a café would be getting £3/10/0 a week in Alice Springs and the same girl could be getting £8/0/0 a week in Darwin or Tennant Creek and a barmaid would be getting the same rate as a barman. This made a great change for the better in the southern end.

We had agreements with the Building Workers Industrial Union

(BWIU). We acted as their agent and issued their tickets and looked after their members the same as our own. While BWIU members remained in the NT they came under our control and we received 50% of their ticket money from the BWIU. This was a very satisfactory agreement. We also had a working agreement with the Amalgamated Engineering Union (AEU). Where there were a number of tradesmen working together the AEU looked after them; in isolated places we did. Harold Souter²³ always gave any assistance he could in Arbitration Court cases. He made available his CAR²⁴ library available to me and sometimes accompanied me to court when a tradesmen's classification was coming up for argument.

It was during 48 that the union decided to take up the plight of the patients at the Leprosarium on Channel Island. There were some 110 patients over there and to state that their conditions were bad was hardly touching the surface of things. It was decided that to alleviate their conditions finance would be needed, so a meeting was called with the AEU, Clerks Union, and the Truck Owners Association. The NAWU put forward the proposal for a May Day Queen contest, the proceeds to be divided between the Leprosarium Welfare Committee (which was set up at that meeting) and the Children's Playground Committee. The NAWU chose for its May Day Queen Jane Ah Matt and after a hectic six weeks of concerts, raffles, socials and other fundraising methods, came in second to the Truck Owners Queen. Some £1600 were raised and divided up between the two committees. With volunteer labour and a lot of "voluntary" materials, playgrounds for the children were built in all the suburbs.

The Leprosarium Committee started to find out what was needed to make the living death of the patients a bit more bearable. We purchased sandshoes, singlets, shorts, dresses, fishing lines, musical instruments etc and got together a concert party. We took these purchases together with

23 Souter was the AEU's Arbitration agent. He later became Secretary of the ACTU, 1956-77.

24 CAR: Commonwealth Arbitration Reports

fruit, biscuits, ice cream etc aboard a “duck”.²⁵ It was an amazing thing to witness the looks of wonder on the peoples faces when they saw the “duck” climb out of the water and proceed on land. They had never seen such a vehicle before. Great was the talk as they climbed all over the “duck” and underneath it and discovered the wheels and then the propeller. Their explanation was that while it was swimming “all same pelican, him been run all same car” and that was that. One of our members used to take movies and much later when we showed them and they recognised each other. Their joy and laughter was worth all the trouble.

Their appreciation of what the union was doing to try and make their lives a bit easier was best shown when some time later we were holding a series of concerts and socials to raise funds to send a young coloured lad over to America to have his eyes operated on. We had provisional agreement with the Minister of Health that he would go pound for pound with us to send the lad to the Mayo Clinic, providing the government doctors said there would be a chance of a successful operation. One day, four patients from the Leprosarium turned up at the back of the union office with a donation for the little boy, £4 17s and some pence. They had heard what we were trying to do and they had taken up a collection and sent four of their members on a long walk at low tide right round the harbour to the union office, and they had to walk back. When we got word that they were back again we published their donation on the front page of the *Northern Standard*.

About this time, a pathologist, Dr Couani, and his wife, Dr Strelletski, came to work in Darwin and he took over the job and started to get in new drugs, and after a bit patients were being sent back to their homes. He was very hostile about the conditions they had to live under and the union decided to get Channel Island closed down and to have a new one built on the mainland where there would be fresh running water, plenty of hinterland for gardens and close to the sea for fishing and

25 Duck: amphibious vehicle, probably an army personnel carrier.

swimming. We had an old timer look about for a suitable place and when he had found one we started a campaign about the conditions. We had “Clicker” White, the organiser, go over to the island and take a set of photos that were terrible to look at. As “Clicker” did not have permission to go over there he had to go bush until after we had published the photos. The Minister of Health came up to Darwin at this time and we had a deputation to him requesting him to build a new Leprosarium on the mainland. He claimed that the Lands Department had no land that was suitable so we offered to take him and the Lands Department out to a suitable site. He never came but the Lands Department had to admit that the land was very suitable, and that’s how Channel Island was closed down and the new Leprosarium was built on the mainland.

In 1948 the Citizens Committee was set up and as Secretary of the union I was appointed as representing the area from the old Vestey’s meatworks southwards. We carried a bit of weight and got some things done.

I think that it was in 48 that the Duke of Gloucester, “Governor General” of Australia, came up on a visit. The “silver tails” went mad, “oh, the dear Duke” etc. They couldn’t even recognise that he was the closest thing to an idiot outside Callan Park.²⁶ The Administrator came down to the newspaper office with great bundles of paper and photos showing him and his Duchess in every kind of uniforms, from childhood to senility, and wanted us to publish them in the paper. We refused. The Administrator then asked the Chamber of Commerce to have all their employees outside on the street when the Vice-Regal cavalcade drove through the streets. They refused. They said if he declared it a half holiday they would close their shops and the employees could do what they liked. He wouldn’t, so the only ones he could stand over were the school children. He had them standing and waving flags etc. At the Vice-Regal ball we were informed that he messed himself and wouldn’t leave the room until the Duchess stood over him and made him go out and get

26 A large psychiatric hospital in Sydney.

washed and changed. He had very weak bowels. One of the “heads” of the Works and Housing showed me the plans of what they had to do for his trip through the NT. Three new trucks fitted up with demountable toilets, had to go before the “vice-regal” safari, and every fifty miles a toilet was taken off a truck and suitably placed in a position for the duke to take a leak etc. Then after cleaning the truck would leapfrog the others and set up again at the proper mileage. We went up to take photos of the royal toilets and had an estimate of the costs made (including penalty rates for the cleaners) and in the next *Northern Standard* we gave them the publicity leaving that we had refused to give them when they came. The “silver tails” didn’t appreciate it but we sold more papers that week than we had ever sold before.

We managed to get an Apprenticeship Committee set up with two union reps, two employer reps and the Government Secretary as chairman. In 1949 quite a number of Award cases came up for hearing for which I had to go to Melbourne. Working up these cases and putting them through the courts was becoming harder.

As the demand for work to be done was slackening off, so also was the employers resistance increasing and they were taking various ways to overcome any push for better wages and conditions. We noticed that a number of organised groupers were being sent into the NT and were starting to cause disruption. They were being assisted by some members of the union for different reasons— religious, selfish, political etc. It really got started with the stop-over by Cardinal Spellman²⁷ and his entourage in Darwin. Our informant told us that he had blown up the parish priest for not taking an active part in setting up the “movement”²⁸ in Darwin and told him that he would advise that a bishop be sent up to organise the opposition to the policy of the Union. This was done and meetings were

27 Spellman (1889-1967) was Archbishop of New York. and the leading Catholic priest in the USA.

28 Catholic Social Studies Movement, the key mass organisation underpinning the industrial groups. The story is in Paul Ormonde’s book, *The Movement* (1972).

held and instructions were issued to members of the union and those that could become members. Qantas, the Shell Company and the Department of Civil Aviation soon became a hotbed of the grouper movement; also the hospital employees were taken over by the groupers.

I had been working non-stop since 1942 and was becoming exhausted and full of bad nerves. Instead of sleeping when I went home of a night, I would find myself reliving the day's work, going over what I had done and why I should have perhaps done it some other way. After court cases this was particularly bad; it would go on night after night. I decided to retire after the yearly general meeting and try an 8 to 5 job for a while.

It was about this time that “Stuttering” Paddy Kennelly, Federal Secretary of the ALP, came up to Darwin and being too “respectable” to come down to the union office, rang me up from the Darwin Hotel and asked me to come up and see him. I knew the reason. In 1946, when the Federal elections were to come up, no opposition was to be put up against “Chilla” Blain, the Country Party²⁹ member for the NT. The union members didn't want Blain and they asked the union to choose a candidate to run against him. Yorcky Walker, the Secretary, who before the bombing had been Chairman of the Darwin branch of the ALP, got it together again, calling it the NT Labor Party. They chose a young ex-Army doctor who was then in charge of the Katherine Hospital. He had been a member of the Labor Party in South Australia. When it became fairly obvious that we were going to win with our candidate, the SA ALP picked an engine driver from Katherine and ran him to split the vote. The result was our man got beaten by some two hundred votes and Blain got in again. We didn't want that to happen again this time and I had given hints that I was going to stand as a union candidate. Knowing that they couldn't win against Blain with a union candidate standing, the ALP called for help and so here was their Federal Secretary responding to the call. I went up to the Hotel Darwin with the editor of the paper, Ron Brown,

29 Now the Country-Liberal Party in the NT.

and we had a long discussion with Paddy. He beat all around the bush for a while but finally asked me what I wanted to pull out of the contest.

We told him that the Union wouldn't stand a candidate if the ALP chose the right man to stand and we had very set ideas on who the right man was. Paddy asked us to name him and we did. There was great relief on his face when we did. We named Jock Nelson, who was the son of Harold Nelson, who had been Secretary of the old Union (Northern Territory Workers Union) and who had led the fight for representation in Federal Parliament. Harold had led the tax revolt and the revolt against corruption in the Administration and for expelling of the heads of the Administration at the time. He had been exonerated by the Royal Commission and became the first member for the NT. We told Paddy that the union would give full support to Jock Nelson and elect him. He was chosen and the union gave him full support, not only through the union but the paper also. We sort of became unofficial campaign directors. He was elected and remained there for 17 years until he retired. Whitlam appointed him Administrator of the NT. The wheel had turned full circle: his father had been the leader of the people that had run a previous Administrator and Government Secretary out of the NT, and now his son had become Administrator.

George Gibbs became organiser for the southern end and built union rooms at Tennant Creek. Bob Anthony who had retired from the railways, became the Darwin-Katherine organiser and did a very good job. He was one of the real old timers. He and Dick Riley were the only ones left of the first Executive of the NAWU when it was formed in 1927. Later that year Yorcky Peel became organiser in Bob Anthony's place and did a good job for a few months (he was a real four-furlong horse). Arthur Olive, who had been an organiser with the Ironworkers union came to the NT again. He had been here in 46 for some time, and worked for the Works & Housing at Francis Camp. After some months I had him appointed Acting Organiser when Bob Anthony left. He was very capable and when I retired in October 49, I recommended him as Acting

Secretary in my place and he was appointed until such time as applications could be called for the position. As he had not much experience in court work I agreed to continue as Industrial Advocate. I was elected President of the Union, as a few months later Olive was injured in a motor accident and after some time in the Darwin Hospital was sent to Sydney for further treatment.

The Pastoral Award conference and Award hearing was to come off in Alice Springs about this time. George Gibbs was to arrange the meetings with the pastoral workers and it was left to me to go down and handle the conference and the Award hearings before the Conciliation Commissioner Portus. We managed to get the award brought up to date. Nothing more than that was OK'd by the Commissioner. The only thing in the Award that could be considered a victory was the deletion of a clause that stated that a cook, cooking for a certain number of persons, would count two Aborigines as one person!! Great opposition was put up by the station owners and managers against this deletion. They started off claiming that Aborigines didn't need the same tucker as white workers; and that one white stockman was worth six Aborigines!! I was able to prove just the opposite. The award for a droving plant laid it down one man for each 259 head of cattle. As each mob was generally 1500 head, that meant six men for the job. Most drovers had two, sometimes three white men, and three or four Aborigines, the Aborigines being the most useful men in the plant. They didn't have three white men and eighteen Aborigines. Even the Commissioner could see silliness of this claim by the employers; and as the rations laid down in the Native Affairs Ordinance for Aborigines working on stations were the same as that laid down in the Pastoral Award for white workers, he agreed to delete the clause. This was about the only success the union had in this award at this time.

The Commissioner claimed he had no power to give equal wages to Aborigines in the pastoral industry. The buck was always passed from one court to another and one minister to another.

Following this Pastoral Award case I had to go to Sydney for a claim before the Full Court (Kelly, Foster and Dunphy). The Advocate for the employers asked me beforehand would the union be bringing witnesses, as they wouldn't bring witnesses if the Union didn't. As we didn't have the money to bring witnesses from the NT to Sydney, I notified him that we wouldn't. I got quite a surprise when he sprang two travelling inspectors as witnesses on me during the case. They gave evidence that would have completely ruined our case, as we had no witnesses. Jack Sweeney (later Judge) was waiting in court to do a case for the AEU. At the adjournment for dinner I grabbed him and took him to the pub for a beer and asked him would he take my brief and I would go in the box and try and prove that the employers expert witnesses didn't know what they were talking about. We didn't have any dinner, we worked all the time lining up questions for Sweeney to ask.

When the court started again I asked permission to hand over the brief to Sweeney and to go in the box as an expert witness. Dunphy objected, claiming that I couldn't be an expert witness. He claimed that he himself was an expert witness as he used to spend his holidays on stations owned by Connors, Docherty & Durack in WA. I interjected and said, "all you know about stations is from the front of the house. I know it from the back of the house and the cattle camps." He nearly took a fit! and was talking about contempt when old Foster broke in and calmed him down. Foster said that he thought I would make a good witness. I was accepted, and I was able to point out that the inspectors lived in the "Big House" not the stock camps. They didn't know the work of the stock camps only the business side of the stations etc. After about two hours in the box, I had proved our case to such an extent that the two inspectors left the Court. They could see that we were going to put them back in the box so they shot through. Foster came on side again with the union and we finished up with the claim being granted (Dunphy dissented).

George Gibbs was Acting Secretary while Olive was in Sydney, and one day in early 51 he came out to my place. I was a bit sick at the time.

The quacks³⁰ said it was gall bladder and it would have to come out. The union had a summons to appear in the Conciliation Court in Darwin on the Monday to show cause as to why all members of the NAWU who could be covered by the TWU and the Storemen and Packers Union (SPU) should not be in those unions. It was Friday afternoon and I was going to have two days and two nights to try and work up a case in answer to the claim. I asked George to get around and see that all the workers from the Wharf and the Bond who were not working, would pack the court on the Monday morning. I went to work and by Sunday evening had decided how we were going to meet the summons. The Federal Secretary of the SPU, Cleary, was appearing for that union and Horan, the Federal Secretary of the TWU, was appearing for that union.

On Monday when they had made their appearances, and Cleary, who was to do the main work for both of them, went to open the case, I interrupted and asked Portus what authority he had to hear a case that really dealt with the registration of the union. I told him that I denied his authority to adjudicate and that if he did so I would seek a writ of mandamus against him. I had decided to just keep on speaking until such time as I was shut up. The rest of the day was taken up by me, developing all sorts of subjects that had a bearing on the claim. Cleary managed to speak, putting the bones of his and Horan's claims for about half an hour and we adjourned till the next day. I spent much of the night looking up matters that I could use, as I had the agreement of the Executive to put all union members in as witnesses. Next day we started and I claimed that both Cleary and Horan had been paid by Shell and Qantas to bring the claims against the NAWU and that it wasn't a genuine claim, that it was as spurious as they were. They used to appear outraged and would demand that I be made to withdraw, I would do so after a lot of argument, and then attack from another quarter. This went on all day, and the following day. Portus asked how long the case was going to go as he said he had other cases to hear. Cleary said it would only take him half an hour and

30 quack: doctor.

Horan said the same. He looked hopefully at me and I said “at least a month”. I then explained that I proposed to call a number of witnesses in Darwin, then at Adelaide River, Pine Creek, Katherine, Daly Waters and so on all the way to Alice Springs; at each and every place where members would be affected by this attempt to smash the union, by using these “professional bosses men” to body snatch.

I started to call our Darwin witnesses and that took care of that day. The next day, more witnesses and more crowds in the courtroom. On the Friday the union had taken up most of the day with witnesses stating that they wouldn't join the SPU or the TWU even if they were paid as much as Cleary and Horan were getting from the bosses. They were made to withdraw of course. Portus explained to them that they couldn't say things like that. They said “well we'll withdraw but we still think it.” After dinner Portus decided that he would adjourn the case to Melbourne. When I objected, he refused to hear me and walked out. He, Cleary and Horan, got well and truly booed by the crowd. About a fortnight later I was called to Melbourne for the adjourned hearing. I took the transcript of the hearing down with me and showed it to Jack Lazarus and Jack McPhillips and also to Harold Souter. They spent half a day giving me CAR cases that they said were applicable to the case. When I went to court I had to get a taxi to cart the books and the driver to help me up the stairs. Cleary and Horan had profited by our actions in Darwin and had packed the court with their members, but I reckoned that they would be much more “respectful” than our members in Darwin. When the court was ready, Portus asked Cleary and Horan how long they wanted and they said that an hour would be enough for them. Then he asked me how long the NAWU wanted? I pointed to the great pile of CAR books that I had and said at least a week. He then decided that he would give a decision to give no decision. He would leave the position as it had been before which of course meant that the SPU and the TWU would not have much chance to body snatch if the NAWU continued to do its work.

The change of rules always gave us trouble as Taylor seemed to be

determined to put every block he could think up in the way of the NAWU for a change of rules. We were still trying in 51 and still being refused.

The last case I did for the union was the High Court cases on behalf of the leader of the Aborigines in a number of strikes. We had found over the years that when an Aboriginal became a leader or spokesman for his people he didn't last long afterwards. He was either sent back bush or framed up on some charge and sent over to Delissaville, a so-called convict settlement over the Harbour. Sometimes they died in questionable brawls; later the participants in the brawl were given their freedom and sent back to their own country. So it became necessary to have a hidden leader, one who could get advice from the union and take it back to the nominal leaders and lead them from behind.

Fred Waters became this hidden leader and he was a good one. At last the Native Affairs found out about him and took measures to get rid of him. They first expelled him from the Bagot Road Compound. He and his wife put up in a hut belonging to Bobby Fisher and the union Social Committee gave him a job as a carpenter. He was a good rough one and a good worker. The union was paying him £15 a week, which was the wage for Carpenters, and he was working at the Stadium, repairing the seats etc. One day his wife came to the union office and told the organiser, Yorky Peel, that the police and a Native Affairs man had come to their house the day before and taken Freddie away and he hadn't come back. Peel and George Gibbs went up and saw the Native Affairs. Gibbs had to take out a licence to employ Fred, and they were told that Fred Waters had been exiled to Haasts Bluff, west of Alice Springs, as a troublemaker. This was a sentence of death for Fred and if the Native Affairs knew anything about Aborigines they knew this.

I was in Melbourne on a Rules case when I got word of the exile of Fred Waters. I was staying with Frank Purse, BWIU Federal Secretary, and Jack Sweeney turned up later that night. Between them they convinced me that I should take immediate action to get a writ of Habeas Corpus on

Fred Waters behalf. I told them that the only ones who could appear on behalf of Aborigines were the “protectors” of Aborigines, in this case the “persecutors” of Aborigines. However I would have to go back to Darwin and get the consent of the Executive Council and all the details. I flew back to Darwin and the Executive Council meeting gave me the full authority to go ahead. We had very little money in the Union’s coffers at that time. Judge Wells, the Supreme Court judge, was in Sydney at the time and I booked to fly to Sydney and approach him for a writ. Clive Evatt, who was then Chief Secretary in the NSW government, rang me that day and asked me to come and see him and offered all kinds of help, none of it very practicable unfortunately. The following morning I was met in Sydney by two wallopers in a big black car. They had been sent by Evatt to pick me up and bring me out to his place. I conferred with him for a while and told him of my plan to see Judge Wells. He sent me out in his car. I knew Wells very well, and knew that I would get some assistance from him. Sad to say I didn’t know that he had a slight stroke a little time before this and was not allowed to do court work for some months. He advised me to go to Melbourne and try for a writ there before a single judge.

I went to Melbourne and ran into Jim Healy, Idris Williams³¹ and Dr Evatt who was appearing for them. I told the tale to them and Dr Evatt told me to get myself a solicitor and barrister and getting a writ would be like getting “a pound of sugar”. I approached Jack Lazarus, who used to do quite a bit of legal work for the NAWU and explained the set up to him, telling him that it would have to be a “freeby” as the union had no money. He agreed to take it and also got a “true blue liberal” solicitor to do the case for free. We appeared before Justice Fullager and after a full day’s argument, Fullager claimed that he had no jurisdiction to give a

31 Idris Williams was a leading Communist Party trade unionist. This may well be a reference to the High Court case brought by a number of unions against the Communist Party Dissolution Act, in November-December 1950, in which Evatt (then Leader of the Labor Party) acted as counsel for the Waterside Workers Federation and the Federated Ironworkers Association.

decision on the case.

On leaving the court we ran into Dr Evatt, Healy and Williams again and the Dr asked me how we had got on. I told him that sugar must be still rationed, and told him of Fullager's decision. He went to town and said where is your barrister? I introduced Lazarus and the solicitor to him and he advised them to issue another writ. I forget the name of this one. We did so and after a wait of about a week appeared before the full High Court. The Government wanted to make sure of this one. Each department, Native Affairs, Administration, Interior etc, had their quota of QCs, barristers and solicitors. I was the only joker there without a wig. The case lasted two days and turned out as I expected. They ruled that I had no authority to bring a case before the court on behalf of an Aborigine. Under the law only the "protectors", the Native Affairs, had this right, so they found against us. When I was going out of court the Clerk of Court stopped me with a bill of costs for some £666. I told him to send it to Mr R G Menzies,³² Canberra or Vestey's Ltd³³ who would be sure to take care of it. I never heard anymore of it.

The Civil Rights Council had become very interested in the case and told me that they were prepared to arrange a series of meetings throughout Victoria, NSW and Queensland. I was very happy with this help and started talking. I arranged a series of talks to suit every occasion, 10 minute talks for smoke-ohs,³⁴ half-hour talks for dinner-time meetings, and anything from one to two hours for night time meetings. The Civil Rights Council did a good job and arranged some very [good] meetings and interviews. After six weeks of nearly non-stop speaking which included addressing the Federal Labor Party at Parliament House in Canberra, addressing all aggregate meetings of the Miners Federation, the Miners put a car at my disposal and as I would finish one meeting I would

32 The Liberal prime minister, 1949-66.

33 A large British meat company. The famous Gurindji land rights claim was for land owned by Vestey's in the Northern Territory.

34 Smoke-ohs: Short work-breaks during which workers would often have a smoke.

hop in the car and go to the next one. All business would stop until I had spoken, then resolutions etc, and I would jump into the car and on to the next one. After a week in Queensland I had lost my voice and only a whisper would come out. I decided to return to Darwin. On the plane on the Monday, the stewardess gave me the paper and the big headlines were "Aboriginal Strike Leader returned to Darwin". He had been returned on the Saturday. He beat me back by two days.

Of all the fights the union had engaged in in my time with them I think that this case and the first strike in 46 were the ones to be proud of. Fred Waters showed his faith in the union and his courage when answering questions from the "presstitutes of the press". I was informed that one question put to Fred was that, "The Administrator brought you back because you promised to be a good boy and not cause any more trouble"? Fred was about 48 years old; he said "What you mean boy? I'm a man and I'll cause trouble till I die while my people want me," and to a further question that the Administrator had let him come back, Fred said "That fella Administrator never let me out, he put me in, union got me out." Some time after I had left the NT I was told by a Territorian that I met in Sydney that Fred had been framed for having a drink and sent to Delissaville and killed in a "brawl". I think that the leadership that he showed and the sacrifice that he made may have helped set in motion the struggle of the Aborigines that have taken place in the NT to this day.

I left the NT in May 1951 and after working in the coal mine at Collinsville, joined the Waterside Workers Federation in Sydney and took my place in that union's struggles over the next thirty years.

If the union's history for these few years seems to revolve around individuals, I have no excuse. Individuals create history, and when they are organised they create better history.