

The Pilbara Aboriginal Strike

by Bain Attwood and Anne Scrimgeour

www.pilbarastrike.org, 2018

Review by Jan Richardson
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Here is an exploration of major industrial action taken in 1946 by Aboriginal pastoral workers of the Pilbara region in Western Australia. Its format is a website rather than a conventional book. Its 2 authors are authorities on the subject. It provides welcome access to a remarkable but little-known chapter of Australian history, detailing an event that changed an industry, government practices and life opportunities for Aboriginal people.

The event was a strike initiated in 1946 by Aboriginal pastoral workers. Their plan seemed impossible to implement across a vast district in the north-west of Western Australia, but elders organised their people and succeeded. They were supported principally by the campaigner Don McLeod, who, as evidenced in the selected documents, was a focus of government opposition. The strike affected more than 20 pastoral stations and lasted for 3 years. A significant effect was the emancipation of Aboriginal workers from government-sanctioned ties to pastoral stations. Aspects of the strike have been brought to the public domain through journal articles, books, film and interviews, but before this website they had never been so clearly linked or made so accessible for others to study.

Professor Bain Attwood, who has written extensively on Aboriginal history, brings his expertise to the task of analysing hundreds of documents written about the strike. Anne Scrimgeour, an independent historian specialising in Pilbara history, brings additional personal knowledge gained when teaching some of the strikers' families in their independent school. An outstanding feature of the site is oral contributions by Nyangumarta language speakers whose words are transcribed into English by linguists Mark Clendon and Barbara Hale. Hale, as a prominent member of the strikers' community, adds a special authenticity to the words translated into English. Also contributing are 2 people involved in organisations that aim to preserve their

languages, culture and history: Bruce Thomas chairs the Wangka Maya Language Centre in Port Hedland, and Lorraine Injie chaired the IBN organisation representing Port Hedland Aboriginal people. Collaboration between these authorities brings a distinctive richness to the amount and type of material drawn upon to tell the story of the strike.

On the opening page of the website is a link to a video that provides a summary of the overarching story of the strike. Here Scrimgeour states her judgement that the strike ‘was a remarkable episode in the history of Aboriginal rights in Australia that isn’t widely recognised’. Bruce Thomas and Barbara Hale, members of the strikers’ community, present the fundamental cause of the strike: instead of proper wages, their people received flour, tobacco, tea, sugar and clothes despite working long hours. It led to the workers’ decision to ‘run their own show’ based on their determination that *marrngu* (their people) would be their own bosses. Attwood summarises the controls imposed upon them by pastoralists, police, the Western Australian Government and mainstream press – controls broken only by their decision to strike and bolstered by some allies in Perth. By viewing this video, the reader is well-prepared for the more detailed contents of the site.

A ribbon along the top of the opening page provides 4 choices: ‘Exhibits’, ‘People’, ‘Timeline’, ‘Archive’. Every section is active, leading to detailed information in each category. The website has been further structured under themes: ‘The Strike’, ‘The Cooperative Movement’, ‘Connections’, and ‘Telling the Story’. A summary precedes every section, followed by specialist topics and access to over 400 primary source documents. Citation of sources for each scanned document demonstrates the wide research undertaken, and Scrimgeour’s clear, accurate maps locate the places in the stories and reports.

The idea of an interactive website for this complex story is excellent, allowing the many ways history can be told to be held in balance with each other, and the owners of oral histories to be respectfully promoted. Its creative formatting allows stories to be told by some of the strike participants, thus giving the Aboriginal voice as much prominence as the historical records. A professional website designer has made the website an easy one to use, with a few provisos.

First, the lack of a website map is an unfortunate omission. Such a map would provide a picture of all the content of the website so that a viewer could go straight to the topic that interests them, rather than navigating through the many sections and subsections. Second, the parameters of the history being covered are not clear; titled ‘The Strike’, it extends well beyond 1946–49. Finally, it is not easy to find information about the website’s creators; to do so, go to the bottom of the opening page, locate the small grey word ‘About’.

Despite these minor impediments to a full enjoyment of this bold method of telling history from multiple sources, the website is impressive. It collects together more material than could be gathered in a conventional book, and photographs both enliven the story and aid in identifying people. It has room for many personal opinions and formal reports by people who were there when events happened, and summaries by historians. Scans of original documents allow readers to assess for themselves the authors' interpretation of their meanings. It can reach students and interested members of society who wish to access a reliable source of information about a 'remarkable event' in Australia. This event can now be widely recognised for its profound influence on historical change and the power of Aboriginal people to 'run their own show'.

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