

## ***On Red Earth Walking: The Pilbara Aboriginal Strike, Western Australia 1946–49***

by Anne Scrimgeour

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*On Red Earth Walking* is an extraordinary, definitive account of the historic strike of Aboriginal pastoral workers in the Pilbara region of Western Australia from 1946 to 1949. The book is anchored in extensive oral history interviews, conducted with veterans of the strike by author Anne Scrimgeour in the early 1990s. The perspectives of these *marrngu* (local Aboriginal people in the Nyangumarta language) are woven through a blow-by-blow account of developments in the strike campaign, and the response of pastoralists and state agencies, drawn from an extremely broad body of research.

The three-year strike was a profound act of self-emancipation. It broke a regime of control that bonded Aboriginal workers and their families to particular stations. While the Department of Native Affairs had the formal power to negotiate written agreements governing pay and conditions, these were not used before the strike on Pilbara stations, where pastoralists had full control. Many workers weren't paid any cash at all.

Police terror held this system in place. Frontier massacres were a living memory for many *marrngu*. Police enjoyed extraordinary powers under the state *Native Administration Act 1936* to ensure confinement on the stations. They also routinely used summary violence beyond these powers. Chains, beatings and dawn raids to intimidate workers secured the regime of hyper-exploitation.

All this changed when the *marrngu* began to strike. Their position as an essential labour force for the capitalist economy of the Pilbara meant that, 'the action taken ... to gain greater autonomy and dignity in their lives involved withholding their labour in a prolonged strike' (p. 1). This led to a dynamic fusion of resistance to colonial control, drawing on assertive pride in the practice of *marrngu* culture, with labour movement tactics that hit the profits of pastoralists.

The strike was conditioned by 'the network of social and family relationships and practices developed in the maintenance of continuing religious and cultural life' (p. 92) and it also became a constituent feature of these relationships. Preparation for the strike, and strategy meetings about its future, took place during seasonal and ceremonial gatherings. Strike camps were situated close to significant sites. The contempt for Aboriginal people and culture held by pastoralists and their supporters led to a fatal underestimation of the *marrngu*. As pastoralist Edith Miller is quoted as saying, 'we had always said that they could never be conscripted or get together in a crowd ... we were wrong' (p. 92).

Scrimgeour's account of the first moment of collective defiance of police by strikers is one of a number of very moving stories. In July 1946, following a major race meeting in Port Hedland, strikers established a camp within the town and refused to move. Passive resistance tactics stopped police attempts to arrest strike leaders. This stand required deep courage and was a decisive turning point: '*Marrngu* discovered that the power exercised over them by the police and officers of the Native Affairs Department was not absolute' (p. 176).

The impact that strike action had on the pastoral economy meant that *marrngu* threats to spread the strike at various points forced a whole series of concessions in the nature of colonial rule. The theft of Aboriginal children, which had been a deep source of grievance for *marrngu* and continued apace across most of Western Australia, was stopped in the Pilbara when the strike began. Pulling more workers off stations was used as a threat by *marrngu* to protect their strike camps from eviction, or protect strike leaders from arrest.

Important for *marrngu* success was solidarity from the trade union movement. Crucial here was the white, communist activist Don McLeod. A central demand of the strike was for official recognition of McLeod as a representative of the *marrngu*. While pastoralists cast *marrngu* as dupes of McLeod, Scrimgeour demonstrates that this demand was fundamentally about Aboriginal people's right to form their own organisations and make collective decisions. McLeod travelled to Perth to promote the campaign and was a key informant for the Communist Party of Australia and other left-wing activists who made up the Committee for Defence of Native Rights that championed the cause of the strikers.

The labour of both Black and white workers, and cooperation between them, was necessary to keep the wheels of the pastoral economy turning in the Pilbara. This created a basis for multiracial working-class action along the supply chain, which at key moments challenged the cross-class 'settler solidarity' relied on by pastoralists to maintain their hegemony. An attempt to bar Aboriginal station workers from riding trains was undermined by railway workers. Wharf labourers at Port Hedland resolved to strike to demand that *marrngu*, excluded by racist regulations from employment on the wharf, could take up jobs. This stance was overturned by Australian Workers' Union officials, acting in concert with the employers and the Department of Native Affairs. However, a resolution to ban the transportation of wool from Port Hedland by the Seaman's Union, called after the police made a series of mass arrests of strikers, could not be broken. This was decisive in forcing negotiations that ended the strike in 1949.

The book explores many questions raised by the strike movement with rigour and sensitivity including gender oppression, caste, personality conflicts, the paternalistic relationship of pastoralists to *marrngu*, contradictions between strike mythology and history, and much more. Sadly, Anne Scrimgeour died of leukaemia in January 2020, one month before the publication of this book. As Aboriginal people today face continuing, discriminatory labour regimes such as the Community Development Program and ongoing police violence, this story of emancipation through mass defiance, and the power of strike action and union solidarity, stands as an inspiration for continuing struggle.

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