

7 December 2005

## **National Day of Action for Stolen Aboriginal Wages**

People across Australia will gather to support the recovery of wages stolen from Aboriginal workers on Human Rights Day, this Saturday 10 December.

Stolen wages claimants from New South Wales & Queensland have asked Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation (ANTaR) to help organise the events which are planned for capital cities and a number of regional centres.

ANTaR National Director, Dr David Cooper said the Day of Action was prompted by the Queensland Government's inadequate offer to stolen wages claimants which is set to expire at the end of this month.

"Members of the Beattie Labor Government should hang their heads in shame over their pitiful offer to Aboriginal people," Dr Cooper said.

The Queensland Government has offered one-off payments of either \$2000 or \$4000 to elderly Aboriginal people and required them to waive their legal right to further compensation. It has acknowledged that this is only a fraction of what was stolen from these people over their working lives and argued that the offer is not intended to replace unpaid wages.

Dr Cooper said the Government's refusal to re-negotiate with Aboriginal people has forced them into lengthy legal action.

"More than 700 people have registered to take legal action, but the Government knows that many of these old people will die before their money is recovered," Dr Cooper said.

Dr Cooper said ANTaR was aware that a number of Queensland Labor MP's were privately embarrassed by their Government's lack of will on this issue.

"Unfortunately up to now none of these MPs or Ministers have asked Caucus or Cabinet to have another look at this issue even though taking a second look has been Queensland Labor Party policy for the past two years," he said.

"We want to let these Government MPs know that if they had the courage to do this they would have strong support throughout Queensland and the rest of Australia."

Dr Cooper said the Queensland Government should regard its offer as a downpayment only.

"The Government really needs to go back and talk to Indigenous communities about what would finalise the issue properly for them. Any fair offer should also be open to the families of deceased workers," he said.

Dr Cooper said the issue of missing, unpaid and underpaid, or 'stolen' wages was not just an issue for Queensland.

"In NSW a scheme is in the process of being established, although we understand it has faced numerous obstacles and many people have still not received an offer," he said.

"Our concern is that the NSW Government remembers that these are real people, not just numbers on a page.

"And other than a promise from the Victorian Government to look into it, other states and territories have not addressed this issue at all despite growing community concerns and awareness."

From 1900 up to the 1980s governments around Australia controlled the wages and savings belonging to Aboriginal people. This money also included child endowment, pensions and soldiers' pay. Much of it went into public revenue or disappeared through fraud or negligence.

ANTaR estimates that more than \$1 billion in today's value was lost or stolen from Aboriginal families across Australia.

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## **Where and When**

National Day of Action for Stolen Wages rallies will take place in the following locations:

### **Queensland:**

#### *Brisbane*

Defend Democratic Rights Rally & March  
Saturday 10 December 1pm Roma St Forum  
National Day of Action for Stolen Wages  
ANTaR Sea of Hands + Information Stall

#### *Townsville*

Sea of Hands 8am - 8pm - all human rights groups invited to set up stalls  
The Strand, Speakers from 6-8pm December 10

#### *Yeppoon*

Sea of Hands display  
The UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights Day Forum  
Beaman Park, Yeppoon  
4-5pm December 10 on the beachfront - Coordinated by Harmony Working Group

### **New South Wales:**

#### *Sydney*

ANTaR NSW stall at the Hands off our Civil Rights Rally  
Town Hall George St, Sydney - 11am Sat 10 December

#### *Lismore*

'People with solutions festival' Stall organized by Lismore Residents for Reconciliation  
Heritage Park, Lismore, 12 noon – 5pm, 10 December

### **Victoria**

#### *Melbourne*

Sea of Hands display at the Eight Hour Monument  
12.30pm(cnr Lygon St & Victoria St, Carlton) next to the Old Melbourne Gaol.

### **South Australia:**

#### *Adelaide*

International Human Rights Day Roundtable meeting on "Developing a strategy to create wider South Australian response to Indigenous Australian concerns"  
Sunday 11 December  
Torrens Building at Tarndanyangga/Victoria Square.

**Northern Territory:**

*Alice Springs*

Under the banner of make poverty history, ANTaR NT will share a stall in the Todd Mall with the Arid Lands Environment Centre (ALEC) 10am to 2pm, 10 December.

**Western Australia:**

*Perth*

ANTaR WA stall with Amnesty International on Sunday 11 December at

## **Background**

Governments around Australia controlled wages, savings and benefits belonging to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people for most of the 20th century. Much of the money held in trust was improperly withheld from its owners. Trust account funds were transferred to public revenue, or disappeared through fraud or negligence along with many of the records. This practice condemned generations of Aboriginal families to lives of poverty.

### **Queensland**

In 2002, the Queensland Government offered up to \$4,000 to people previously controlled under the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Protection Act. Families of deceased workers cannot apply.

Claimants must sign an indemnity, waiving their right to recover their full entitlements. Although the offer closes in three weeks, there is an 18 month backlog of FOI requests to retrieve financial information.

Less than half the anticipated claimants have applied. One-third of these were rejected because the government cannot find records to evaluate the claims. A recent Stolen Wages Working Group survey showed 94 percent of Indigenous respondents think the offer is unfair, and 100 percent think descendants of deceased workers should be included.

### **New South Wales**

The NSW Government has apologised for practices of previous governments, and promised to fully reimburse money still owing, at today's value, there is no demand to surrender legal rights, and both direct and descendant claimants are eligible. The NSW Government admits its records are incomplete.

Although it has promised to give due weight to oral evidence the burden of proof appears to rest with claimants.

The Aboriginal Trust Funds Repayment Scheme (ATFRS) has commenced processing claims, prioritising direct living claimants. Guidelines for the operation of the scheme are not publicly available and how appeals will be handled is not yet known. Lack of procedural transparency remains an issue. Recently the ATFRS made an interim payment offer to several claimants who are now considering their options.

Difficulties with the Australian Tax Office have recently been resolved in favour of NSW claimants, but for other states the tax issue is still up in the air.

### **Other States and Territories**

Victoria and South Australia controlled the wages of child apprentices. In Victoria there is the possibility of government assistance for record searches. The WA Government is believed to be assessing its exposure to workers' claims.

The Commonwealth government is responsible for the missing wages and savings of Northern Territory workers. The Commonwealth has not yet examined its role in decades of defective distribution of child endowment and pensions nationally.