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LAWRENCE . . . an apparent leader . . . rangy, middle-aged.

Darwin: Town of discontent

"I stand with the natives for a new deal"

says GORDON WILLIAMS in Darwin

An "Argus" special correspondent's report on the aborigines' strike

THE 250 strike-conscious aborigines who recently held stop-work protests against their Government-ordained standard of living have started a new chapter in aboriginal history.

They have lit a fire that will — and should — blaze until the conditions of the native population throughout Australia are examined dispassionately, carefully, sympathetically, and free of prejudices.

I stand with the natives in their fight for a new deal.

My first impression was that the aborigine is not yet ready for complete industrial emancipation, with its duties of self-care and civic responsibility.

This was followed by the continuously growing conviction that he is at least entitled, humanly, to a chance to test his ability to carry the burdens that his release from the existing brand of government paternality would place on him.

I am convinced he should have his chance.

Not getting their dues

THE aborigines claim a payment of £7 a week, the right to maintain themselves on their wage, and full civic status within the law.

They do the menial tasks of this peculiar town, which appears to be losing all its reason for being, and for the great part work for the Government.

They scythe the tall grass around these blazing streets and roads, collect the bottles that give a quaint color to the footpaths, paddocks, and facades of the rambling village, and generally act as the well-known hewers and drawers.

For this each is paid £2 a week, and is entitled by ordinance to liberal rations, more than adequate clothing, and satisfactory accommodation.

It is estimated officially that the wage and allowances cost the Government £6/14/4 for each aborigine a week; if that be so, the aborigines' claim for £7 a week, with the right to victual and house himself, does not seem extravagant—nor does it offer any new menace to the Australian taxpayer.

But—and I say this with a full sense of responsibility—I do not believe that the aborigine has ever received his ordained rations.

I do not believe that his settlement accommodation has ever been satisfactory.

I do not think that those charged with the administration of the ordinances have always given them effect.

I know that within the last few months the food supply and the clothing issue in the town compounds have improved. Significantly, the improvement followed the first strike of the aborigines in November.

Shock for the unconditioned

BUT the ordinance provisions are still not observed fully.

Until a few months ago many aborigines were living in virtual squalor and in relative deprivation in the Berrimah Compound, a few miles from Darwin.

Happily, Berrimah is passing, and the new Bagot Road Compound nearby, is, I hope, a sign of a new mind and a new will in administration.

Yet these are town settlements; compounds in the outer country are still places that would shock the white mind not conditioned to acceptance of such things by long years of Territorian life — with its deathly tradition of racial intolerance, exploitation, and miscegenation.

I have seen within a few miles of Darwin, almost under the Administration's eye, and certainly within its knowledge, natives living in conditions of such squalor, filth, and abasement as defy open description.

I have been given no satisfactory official explanation.

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DEMANDS of the aborigine strikers must be assessed as an industrial claim and given the consideration any such claim would receive in a court of arbitration.

Further, those demands or their effect must be examined from the human viewpoint.

It must be asked: Is the town aborigine worth the money he seeks, Are he is capable of handling it without harming himself or his dependants, if his moral fibre is tough enough to withstand the temptations a white sub-tropical civilisation offers to a moneyed man, and if he can escape exploitation.

Assessment is this difficult, but not impossible.

It is claimed here (and it has been published freely in the southern States) that the aborigines [illegible] frame their demands and take up the strike weapon of their own will.

It has been said again and again that they have been used by the allegedly Communist-controlled North Australian Workers' Union.

I do not believe this.

I have spoken to dozens of aborigines of varying degrees of intelligence; some have little knowledge of why they strike or for what, but there are very many who are fully aware of the significance of the fight and its cause.

Lawrence, a rangy dissident middle-aged Waugalt tribesman, and ageing Fred Waters (now in exile at Hasst's Bluff) were their apparent leaders.

"Hidden" leadership

I AM certain that behind these apparent leaders were and still are more educated, more alert, and much wiser aborigines, who choose the way of darkness, knowing that their appearance as leaders of the betterment move would bring them precisely what it has brought Fred Waters.

I have spoken to aborigines who might well belong to this small company of hidden leaders.

That they have received advice, encouragement, and forthright help from the N.A.W.U. is patent; that, however, is not extraordinary.

I think any industrial organisation, whether it adhered to the Left wing or the Right wing of Labor, would have given them similar support.

I know that the natives' case has been prejudiced in the southern mind by the repeated statement that they are in the grip of the Communists. I believe this statement is ill-considered.

Actually, the N.A.W.U. has an executive membership of 16. Two are Communists, many are A.L.P. men.

The number of rank and file Communists is negligible; most are Left wing Laborites who may be best described as militants.

The native strikes sprang from a purely native impulse.

The very first strike of them all (in 1946) was led by a highly intelligent aborigine who has some Messianic characteristics.

This man is still "in circulation," living a blameless, useful, and purposeful life.

Contempt in high places

THE entry of the N.A.W.U. came after the strike weapon had been taken from the armory.

Undoubtedly the union helped the aborigine to wield the weapon, *but I can find no evidence that the union placed it in his hand.*

The great white objection to the natives' demands is that no "Jackie" (a term which reveals the minds of its users—and these include some high officials up here) is worth £7 a week. He will scythe grass for only about three hours a day and then patiently wait a return to the ease and rest of the compound.

They declare that if "Jackie" had to be paid £7 a week, no white man would employ him, and Darwin's blacks would be thrown back on the Government or driven out of town.

They declare that, given £7 a week, the aborigine would spend it on grog, gambling, lolly water, picture shows, taxi rides —and then, with his dependants, turn back to the Government for food and shelter.

They have only contempt for the aborigines' claim for equality of status—and to attempt to discuss the proposal with them objectively is to invite curiosity, suspicion, and finally ostracism.

The mind of the Territorian is against the native; the few scintillant exceptions prove the over-running rule.

"Three-hour" workers

IT may be that many natives given £7 a week would buy grog, ride in taxis, and gamble.

It may be they would be exploited. But there must always be two parties to an exploitation—and in a community such as this it would take no great effort to seek out and destroy the exploiters.

The aborigine is exploited now, but I know of no prosecutions for overcharging.

It may be that no aborigine is worth £7 a week as a worker, but I know many employers, particularly boatmen, who pay their trained aborigine crews £8 a week and more.

It may be that the aborigines will work only three hours a day in the moist and shattering tropic heat, cutting the grass and shifting the garbage. But I have seen many white workers in this town who labor no longer—to Darwin's very great discontent.