**A Few Important Events of the 1950s**

In this edition I continue my look at a few of the significant events, organizations and people of the 1950s, a time that was important for me because I was born in the first year of that decade. Six months after I was born dramatic events were unfolding in Darwin.

**Darwin Aboriginal Workers Strike 1950-51**

In November 1950 Aboriginal workers in Darwin staged "the biggest and best organised native strike ever conducted in Darwin". The workers had organised the strike themselves and then sought advice from the North Australia Workers Union (NAWU). The two strike leaders were a man named "Lawrence" and a Police tracker named Billy Palata. In mid-January 1951 Darwin Police 'dispersed' an armed group of more than 50 Aboriginal strikers who were, in their own words, "marching on Darwin". Lawrence and Billy Palata were arrested and police refused to bail the two men to NAWU officials saying that as Aborigines the men can only be bailed to the Native Affairs Department or their employers.

Secretary of the NAWU, Mr. T. Peel, remarked, "It is obvious that the arrest of the two Aboriginal strike leaders is a deliberate attempt to cut off the leadership of the strike and intimidate these people who are standing up for their rights both as workers and human beings." Lawrence and Palata remained in gaol and Native Affairs Department officials claimed that "Communists" were behind the strike. Lawrence appeared in Court on Australia day 1951 and was sentenced to four months imprisonment with hard labour. After Lawrence is gaoled his place as strike leader is taken by a quietly spoken Larrikia man called Fred Waters. On 11th February 1951 Fred Waters organised a 'lighting strike' of Aborigines at the Bagot compound in Darwin. The Director of Native Affairs, Mr Frank Moy, responded by using his administrative power to banish Waters to Haarsts Bluff in Central Australia some 1200 miles from Darwin.

The final word on the strike was made by then Federal minister for the Interior, Mr. Anthony, who claimed that the whole episode had been a "Communist-inspired plan for general industrial disturbance". He stated that, "I am not prepared to allow natives, who are wards of the Commonwealth, to be used for this purpose". Nevertheless the Darwin strike was yet another of numerous signs that indigenous people were not passively accepting the annexation of their lands and the colonialist exploitation of their labour.

**AAF and FCAATSI**

In 1956 NSW activist Pearl Gibbs, who had earlier been Secretary of the Aborigines Progressive Association (APA), co-founded the **Australian-Aboriginal Fellowship (AAF)** in Sydney with Faith Bandler. Faith was a woman of South-sea Islander descent whose father had been a kidnapped and bought to Australia as slave to work on the QLD sugar fields. Faith would later be a prominent campaigner for the 1967 Referendum. The AAF proved to be an important organization in NSW in the 1950s and was a vehicle for the political education and organizing abilities of a new generation of activists, including Ken Brindle. The main reason for its establishment was to create a forum for a partnership between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in NSW. As such it would campaign against State government policies of assimilation, and strive towards educating the wider community about issues affecting Aborigines.

The AAF’s first public meeting in April 1957 attracted a huge crowd that almost packed out the Sydney Town Hall. The crowd consisted mostly of non-Aboriginal people and was an indication of the vast reservoir of goodwill that existed in the white community toward Aboriginal people at that time. Following the successful launch of the AAF, the organization became affiliated with numerous trade unions, and the Australian Union of Women.

A significant development from the work of the AAF was the formulation and distribution of a petition for amendments to the Federal Constitution regarding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. This petition had been developed by non-Aboriginal feminist Jessie Street in conjunction with Faith Bandler and Pearl Gibbs, and this campaign would later evolve into the successful 1967 Referendum.

The Aboriginal-Australian Fellowship also called for land rights and the improvement of living conditions for Aboriginal communities in New South Wales, as well as a conducting a successful campaign in 1962 to repeal certain sections of the *NSW Aborigines Protection Act 1909*, The AAF also played an important role in the development of ideas during the 1950s for a national body to represent the interests of Aboriginal peoples.

In February 1958, the first national indigenous political organization was founded in Adelaide. The **Federal Council of Aboriginal Affairs (FCAA)** was created as a national voice for Aboriginal people, yet paradoxically at the inaugural meeting, of the twenty-five people who were there, only four (Bert Groves, Doug Nicholls, Bill Onus and Jeff Barnes) were Aboriginal. As the organization grew the dominance of non-indigenous people on its governing committee became entrenched, and even as it changed its name to **Federal Council of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders (FCAATSI)** at its Easter conference in 1964, there were rumblings of Aboriginal discontent at lack of indigenous control.

The same year as FCAATSI was founded in 1958 my hometown of Nambucca Heads made national headlines when white people in the town signed a petition objecting to the Aborigines Welfare Board assisting an Aboriginal family to purchase a house in the ‘white area’ of the town. One of the petition signatories said that such a move would ‘affect the tourist potential of the area’ and another claimed that white schoolchildren would be ‘belittled’ if they ‘associated with Aboriginal children’. The response of the Vice President of the Australian-Aboriginal Fellowship Faith Bandler was to describe this situation as ‘just like Little Rock Arkansas’, referring to similar events confronting the American civil rights movement in the USA at the time.

Meanwhile throughout the 1950s a young Aboriginal man from Alice Springs was busy making a name for himself in soccer circles by being invited to England to trial for first division Liverpool F.C.. His name was Charles Perkins and at the end of the 1950s he would move to Sydney and later begin studies at University of Sydney. Whilst a student he would become the most famous Aboriginal activist in Australia when he staged the 1965 Freedom Ride through racist rural areas of NSW. But that story will be told in the next edition of my column when we look at the major events of the 1960s.

**Gary Foley**

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