

EMINENT INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIAN

Great Warriors - *VINCENT LINGIARI*

(1908 - 1988)



The story of Vincent Lingiari and the 1966 Gurindji Walk-off is one of great significance in the pursuit of Indigenous rights in Australia, and as a symbolic and tangible step towards mutual recognition and peaceful settlement between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

The Gurindji and the Pastoralists

As white colonisation extended north in the mid to late nineteenth century, people like the Gurindji were massacred, and their lands taken for grazing. The last recorded massacre in the Territory took place in the 1920s.

Having taken the land, and lost the use of cheap convict labour, white pastoralists turned to the now landless Aboriginal people for labour. On stations across the north, Aboriginal people became the backbone of the cattle industry, working for little or no money, minimal food and appalling housing. One of these stations was Wave Hill, owned by British Lord Vestey.

According to Billy Bunter Jampijinpa, a veteran of the Gurindji Walk-off who lived on Wave Hill Station, "We were treated just like dogs. We were lucky to get paid the 50 quid a month we were due, and we lived in tin humpies you had to crawl in and out on your knees. There was no running water. The food was bad - just flour, tea, sugar and bits of beef like the head or feet of a bullock. The Vestey mob were hard men. They didn't care about blackfellas."

The Strike That Became a Land Claim

On 23 August 1966 Vincent Lingiari led members of the Gurindji people, along with members of the Ngarinman, Bilinarra, Warlpiri and Mudbara peoples off Wave Hill Station. Billy Bunter Jampijinpa was only 16 when the walk-off happened:

Vincent pulled everyone out on Tuesday and we walked with the kids and our swags to the Victoria River where we camped till after Christmas. After we had been there a couple of days, the Vestey mob came and said they would get two killers (slaughtered beasts) and raise our wages if we came back. But old Vincent said, "No, we're stopping here". Then in early 1967 we walked to our new promised land, we call it Daguragu (Wattie Creek), back to our sacred places and our country, our new home land."

Vincent Lingiari and the Gurindji people held out at for nine years at Daguragu despite harassment, threats of violence and evictions, efforts to cut off their food supplies and even bribery – the offer of better accommodation built by the government for them at Wave Hill Welfare Settlement. Yet they did not go back.

The walk-off started as a strike over Aboriginal cattle workers' wages and conditions, but it soon became clear that Vincent Lingiari and the Gurindji people were on about something much deeper: they were fighting to win back our land. At least once in the struggle, the Gurindji were close to starvation. Yet when Lord Vestey offered to pay the Gurindji some "money" wages, Vincent Lingiari refused, telling Lord Vestey, "You can keep your gold, we just want our land back".

Support From Around Australia

The Gurindji walk-off was not the first time that Indigenous peoples had demanded their lands back from the white colonisers in Australia, but it was the struggle to attract broad public support for land rights around Australia and overseas.

There were demonstrations and arrests in southern Australia in support of the walk-off, and many church, student, trade unionists and members of the Communist Party of Australia gave practical and fundraising support to the Gurindji struggle. Vincent Lingiari, Billy Bunter Jampijinpa and others travelled around Australia to drum up support for the strikers.

Victory at Last

The Gurindji's claim fell on deaf ears until Gough Whitlam won government in 1972. Three years earlier, the Coalition government had been given a proposal to give just eight square kilometres back to the Gurindji. Cabinet would not discuss the issue.

When the Australian Labor Party took power, they finally moved to support the Gurindji claim. They put a stop on development leases granted by the Northern Territory Land Board that could damage Indigenous rights, suspended mining exploration licenses, and gave a small grant of land at Daguragu/Wattie Creek, as an initial step towards the final land hand-over.

On that day, Gough Whitlam addressed Vincent Lingiari and the Gurindji people, saying: "On this great day, I, Prime Minister of Australia, speak to you on behalf of all Australian people - all those who honour and love this land we live in. For them I want to say to you: I want this to acknowledge that we Australians have still much to do to redress the injustice and oppression that has for so long been the lot of Black Australians. Vincent Lingiari, I solemnly hand to you these deeds as proof, in Australian law, that these lands belong to the Gurindji people and I put into your hands part of the earth itself as a sign that this land will be the possession of you and your children forever."

Vincent Lingiari's Legacy

Vincent Lingiari died in January 1988. Every year until then he attended the Gurindji's annual re-enactment of the walk-off. Vincent Lingiari was a leader and holder of the cultural authority of the Gurindji people. His fight for his people's rights – to the custodianship and ownership of their land and the capacity to practice their law, culture and language – made him a national figure.

Vincent Lingiari confronted the vast economic and political forces that were arrayed against him and his people. In doing so, he won a victory that is one of the most outstanding achievements in the history of the struggle for the recognition of Indigenous people, their rights and responsibilities in the land, and their ability to practice their law, language and culture.



Vincent Lingiari beside plaque, Wattie Creek, Northern Territory, 1980