A history of stolen wages in Queensland

From 1904 to 1972, the wages and savings of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers were controlled by the state. These workers, some as young as 10 when they started, were denied the basic entitlements all workers take for granted. Workers were not paid their wages, paid more tax than other Queenslanders and were denied the right to use their savings as they saw fit. For some, this system was imposed for over a decade of employment.

Worse still, government allowed, through neglect and indifference, for wages not diverted by legislative control to be stolen. Researchers estimate that the total amount withheld was nearly half a billion dollars.

In 2002, after aggrieved workers commenced litigation against the state, the then Labor Government made an offer of $55.4 million. This was to be paid as reparations for the stolen wages and included initial payment of $4000 or $2000 to eligible claimants. Included in the offer was the issuing of a written apology and a parliamentary acknowledgement to recognise the injustices perpetrated.

When announcing the reparations, the government acknowledged that the $55.4 million offered was significantly less than what was stolen. However, the Indigenous community was asked to accept the offer and move on in the spirit of reconciliation. The offer was subsequently accepted.

QCU supports government commitment to Indigenous education

By 2008, only $20 million of the $55.4 million had been distributed so the government made some smaller, second-round payments and also established the Indigenous Queenslanders Fund - an education fund for Indigenous children. This was a welcome announcement however the Fund was set up using money originally set aside for the stolen wages claimants.

Charter for Working Queenslanders - treating workers with fairness and equity

The QCU is currently rolling out its Charter for Working Queenslanders campaign - a set of policies and principles seeking real political action to improve the lives of working Queenslanders. Stolen wages is a key plank of the Charter as the QCU believes that fair recognition of the past injustices against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders needs to be addressed - which includes payment of the full $55.4 million. More info in the Charter can be found at www.charterforqld.com.au

STOLEN WAGES UPDATES

The QCU produces the "Stolen Wages Update" to provide news on the campaign for wage justice. You can download these updates below:

- November 2011

LINKS

- Creative Spirits article - Repaying Stolen Wages - http://www.creativespirits.info/aboriginalculture/economy/repaying-stolen-wages.html

- European Network for Indigenous Australian Rights: news - http://eniar.org/news/stolenwages73.html
- QUT Stolen Wages fact sheet - http://www.reconciliation.qut.edu.au/issues/recweek/StolenWagesFactSheet.pdf
- Senate Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs: Unfinished business - Indigenous stolen wages - http://www.aph.gov.au/senate/committee/legcon_ctte/completed_inquiries/2004-07/stolen_wages/report/report.pdf

MEDIA

- ANTaR statement re second round offer (25 March 2008)

- Courier Mail - Stolen wages stolen again (25 March 2008)
- ABC News - Qld stolen wages scheme labelled shameful (26 March 2008)

QCU MEDIA RELEASES

- Stolen wages twins come from Townsville to tell Minister their story