“An Unpopular Cause”: The Union of Australian Women’s Support for Aboriginal Rights

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The Union of Australian Women (UAW) was a national organisation for left-wing women between World War II and the emergence of the women’s liberation movement. Along with other left-wing activists, UAW members supported Aboriginal rights, through their policies, publications and actions. They also attracted a number of Aboriginal members including Pearl Gibbs, Gladys O’Shane, Dulcie Flower and Faith Bandler. Focusing on NSW activity in the assimilation period, this article argues that the strong support of UAW members for Aboriginal rights drew upon the group’s establishment far-left politics, its relations with other women’s groups and the activism of its Aboriginal members. Non-Aboriginal members of the UAW gave practical and resourceful assistance to their Aboriginal comrades in a number of campaigns through the assimilation era, forming productive and collaborative relationships. Many of their campaigns aligned with approaches of the Communist Party of Australia and left-wing trade unions. In assessing the relationship between the UAW and Aboriginal rights, this article addresses a gap in the scholarship of assimilation era activism.

Keywords: Aboriginal Rights, Assimilation, Feminist Activism, Union Activism, Union of Australian Women (UAW)

In a 2007 publication produced for Reconciliation Australia, Lenore Coltheart celebrated the role of women in working towards social justice. She identified seven women, “Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal women around Australia,” who were prominent in the 1967 Referendum, what she called “a campaign that started in kitchens and local community halls” in Australia and then “stretched around the world.”¹ A point that Coltheart did not make was that of these seven activists, five were members of the Union of Australian Women

* The author would like to thank Labour History’s two anonymous referees as well as the Editor, Professor Diane Kirkby, for her advice and support.
Whilst Coltheart and others have recognised the achievements of these individual women, little work has been done to detail the achievements of the UAW in campaigns for justice and equality for Aboriginal people. This article overcomes this absence in the historical literature.\(^2\) It argues that UAW support for Aboriginal rights was robust, and is deserving of close attention as an example of interracial organising during the assimilation era. Cheryl Hercus has noted the UAW “provided continuity between earlier women’s activism and the emergence of women’s liberation in Australia.”\(^3\) But it did more than this. The organisation’s focus on equality and human rights gave meaningful and practical assistance to its Aboriginal members and their fights for justice and social equality for Aboriginal people.

The work of Marilyn Lake, Alison Holland and Fiona Paisley has greatly advanced scholarship on non-Aboriginal women’s support of Aboriginal rights in the first half of the twentieth century.\(^4\) Lake writes of the development of arguments from women’s groups from a concentration on increasing federal responsibility, through maternal issues – that both white and Aboriginal mothers should have the same rights and protections in the interwar period.\(^5\) Paisley notes that political changes in the British Commonwealth during this time were beneficial to feminists in pursuing Aboriginal reform as part of their duties as citizens of nation and empire.\(^6\) Holland examines the development of the feminist reform agenda, which, she argues, focused “on the status of the mixed race child over and above that of the Aboriginal mother” in the interwar years.\(^7\)

This article begins with an introduction to the UAW and its connections with, and departures from, similar advocacy work among earlier women’s

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2. This article expands on the only existing account of the UAW and its support for Aboriginal rights: Barbara Curthoys and Audrey McDonald, *More than a Hat and Glove Brigade: The Story of the Union of Australian Women* (Sydney: Bookpress, 1996), ch. 9.
organisations, to acknowledge the debts the UAW owed to these activists. It then discusses the work of the UAW in supporting Aboriginal issues, noting some of the campaigns to which the UAW contributed practically and politically, and outlines the work of four prominent Aboriginal New South Wales members in order to demonstrate their work within the organisation and alongside non-Aboriginal members in the assimilation period. Whilst UAW members were active in all states, this article restricts its study to New South Wales members, materials and issues because Aboriginal people lived in different circumstances according to state legislation. They developed varying political strategies to direct activists in the different states, which in turn shaped interaction between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal allies, each of which warrant their own study.

**Founding the Union of Australian Women**

Within the history of feminism in Australia, Lesley Johnson characterises the 1950s as a period that “produced a new political subject or identity – women seeking to speak in their own voices.” 8 The UAW exemplifies this change. Whilst never having a large membership, the UAW was a particularly active national organisation for left-wing women activists in the period between first- and second-wave feminism. It was established in 1950, arising from the New Housewives Association (NHA), which had been founded by Communist Party members. The NHA's main focus initially was to combat post-war profiteering affecting working-class housewives. This soon broadened to include campaigns on peace, equal pay, opposition to conscription, children’s and Aboriginal rights, and solidarity with women all over the world. 9 After the attempted banning of the Communist Party of Australia (CPA), and the increased surveillance of communist-related organisations, the New Housewives Association disbanded, and its members formed the UAW on 26 August 1950 in Sydney. 10

This was a year before assimilation was adopted as the official government policy at the Third Commonwealth-State Native Welfare Conference, which set out to achieve “uniformity throughout Australia in the enjoyment of the privileges of citizenship.” 11 The UAW as the NHA's successor worked to create unity amongst disparate groups of women – workers, housewives,

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10. Ibid., 7.
the middle class, CPA and Australian Labor Party (ALP) supporters, among others. At its founding, Freda Brown, an early UAW member and later its Secretary and President for many years, said that “women organised into action can play a decisive part in the struggle for a better living in an Australia at peace.”

The UAW became a national organisation at its first national conference on 7 November 1956. By 1957, it was already an energetic and growing network with a national membership of around 6,000 women, many of whom had never previously joined any group. According to Brown, “we were the first ones to get women out onto the streets. It wasn’t easy in those days; we were the only women demonstrating.” At a time when women were not supposed to want anything more than being a good wife and mother, and when women’s activity outside the domestic and family spheres was not always encouraged, the UAW brought political action to many women’s lives for the first time. It showed them that they could take on practical and achievable tasks in working for peace, equality, and justice, by garnering the experiences of everyday women – resourcefulness, concern, and the ability for hard work – and applying them to their campaigns. Brown said, “it played a very valuable role in organising women, in contributing to the peace struggle and in getting women out on the streets.”

The UAW was an organisation that encouraged women of all races and classes to join. Yet, as Freda Brown said of its formation: “I think it was normal and natural that an organisation more concerned with working-class women should come into being.” The UAW distinguished itself from earlier women’s organisations, such as the Australian Federation of Women Voters, when it emphasised its concern with the lives of working women and mothers and their common aim for a peaceful and equitable life. Brown said that the UAW’s goal “to embrace all women, in the factories, the office, and the home, is to be welcomed and encouraged by the whole Labor Movement and all sections of the working people of Australia.”

The UAW’s origins in the CPA was a matter of continuing debate. Betty Reilly, also a member of both the UAW and the CPA, believed that the views of the Party should not be imposed upon the UAW and that the women’s organisation was not to be “an offspring of the CPA and to have no socialist

13. UAW (NSW), Annual Report, 1956, 2.
14. Freda Brown, interview with Barbara Curthoys, 5 October 1995, Barbara Curthoys Collection, A8441 (xxxiv), University of Newcastle Archives (UNA), Newcastle.
15. Ibid.
16. Freda Brown, interview with Barbara Curthoys, 7 October 1994, Barbara Curthoys Collection, UNA.
objective.”18 Certainly, the organisation’s constitution made this quite clear:19 When later asked if the UAW was simply a CPA front, Freda Brown affirmed its independence:

no, no, it was an independent women’s organisation. Progressive, very progressive, close to the unions, a working class organisation, but it certainly was not [a front] – we had many members of the Labor Party. I would think maybe a few, not many, a few Liberals. But the overwhelming majority would have been just ordinary women.20

Nevertheless, the UAW inherited some CPA members and policies, including the CPA’s support of Aboriginal rights. From the day of its establishment in 1950, the UAW put itself on the record for supporting equal rights for Aboriginal Australians, as one of its first resolutions.21 This date coincided with the commencement of a new phase in the movement for Aboriginal rights, with a “coalition politics” approach where alliances of Aboriginal and white activists became increasingly common.22 As Attwood and Markus note, this was a time of increasing public debate wherein “a campaign in which a move to federal control, the repeal of racial discriminatory laws and the securing of citizenship rights came to be regarded by many campaigners as a series of reforms which naturally belonged together.”23 The UAW’s quest for equality for all underpinned its support of Aboriginal rights, with the realisation that, even in 1958, “the rights of coloured people to live and work under the same conditions as their white neighbours has still to be accepted by many people.”24

The UAW and Other Organisations

Whilst members of the CPA and trade unions held joint membership of the UAW, some in prominent positions, publicly the UAW was not a party political organisation. Branches welcomed members from all political persuasions, or none. However, many of their policies in the areas of peace, equal pay, and justice were shared with leftist trade unions and the CPA. Particularly

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19. Z236 Federal Office, Box 150, Noel Butlin Archives Centre (NBAC), Australian National University, Canberra.
21. “Cheers as Women’s Union is Launched,” Tribune, 30 August 1950, 2.
was this true of their stance on Aboriginal rights. Bob Boughton’s research on non-Aboriginal activism in the Aboriginal rights sphere has shown the importance of the “vibrant tradition of working class activism in support of Indigenous rights.”

Boughton focuses particularly on the work of the CPA, which from the early 1920s was the first Australian political organisation to recognise the rights of Aboriginal people, and to work for better conditions. The CPA’s opposition to the treatment of Aborigines emerged through its internationalist policy of self-determination. When the United Nations established the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in 1948, the Party condemned racism as a violation of the UDHR, leading the way for activists for decades to come.

Heather Goodall writes that in NSW, the CPA “remained interested in Aboriginal affairs, but as an organisation it still kept its distance from Aboriginal bodies” leading up to the post-war period. However, this was not the case with the UAW. The organisation became an affiliate of the Aboriginal-Australian Fellowship (AAF) upon its establishment in 1957. Importantly, the AAF began with the collaboration of two UAW members, Pearl Gibbs and Faith Bandler, which facilitated closer connections between the two organisations. Jack Horner, Honorary Secretary of the AAF from 1958 to 1966, conceded that the early Aboriginal rights movement’s “strongest support … came from Australian women’s organisations, who were actively working for pacifist and feminist ideals.”

Horner singled out five groups including the UAW.

Furthermore, the UAW drew inspiration – and also departed from – the pioneering work of a number of existing women’s organisations in supporting Aboriginal women. A pioneering group of white Australian women with interests in the area of Aboriginal rights was the Women’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU). Although established in 1891, it was not until the interwar period, when Ada Bromham spoke at the 1933 WCTU Conference, calling for equal rights for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal women, including their right to “the sanctity of their own persons,” that

27. Heather Goodall, Invasion to Embassy: Land in Aboriginal Politics in New South Wales, 1770–1972 (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2008), 274.
this group voiced concern about Aboriginal issues. Bromham became the WCTU’s national secretary and a stalwart activist, and in 1958 she was elected as a Vice-President of the Federal Council for Aboriginal Advancement. Her work for Aboriginal rights in the 1950s and 1960s is well documented. She had worked alongside UAW National President Freda Brown on various campaigns since the early 1940s, and from its establishment the UAW consulted with Bromham, inviting her to speak at meetings and help branches raise awareness of Aboriginal rights. Whilst the actions of the WCTU were firmly based in the group’s Christian values, they shared many policies with the UAW in the area of Aboriginal rights.

Similarly, the Australian Federation of Women Voters (AFWV) was established in 1924 as a non-partisan affiliation of women’s organisations. Constituted of middle-class women, and primarily working for equal citizenship for women, the AFWV originally approached Aboriginal rights as a “complementary issue,” but later embraced this strand of their work at a higher level. In 1927, AFWV President Bessie Rischbieth joined a campaign for a Royal Commission into a greater role for the Australian government in Aboriginal affairs. Fiona Paisley writes that “while other large women’s networks such as the National Council of Women did consider the Aboriginal question among their welfare interests, it was the AFWV and its key members that constituted the main source of activism on Aboriginal rights.” Overall, however, the AFWV concerned itself with constitutional reform and not any social justice issues, and spoke as white women on behalf of Aboriginals, without consultation, unlike the UAW.

The United Associations of Women (UA), established in 1929, with a professional and middle-class constituency, was a NSW umbrella group of organisations. CPA women criticised the “bourgeois” actions of the UA, and claimed that the group’s aim, as one of “the boss class women’s organisations which are all playing a part in the fierce drive against the workers,” was “to deceive the working women regarding the true character of capitalism and the present economic crisis – to hide the class character of capitalist society.” The UA began the work towards the Australian

31. UAW Qld Committee of Management, Minutes, 26 May 1956, Union of Australian Women Collection, UQFL193, Box 1, Fryer Library, University of Queensland Library (FL-UQL).
Women’s Charter movement (AWC) in 1943, with Jessie Street (who had earlier served as the NHA Vice-President and then that group’s patron). Emanating from a broad-ranging conference, one of the AWC resolutions noted its disapproval of “the continued neglect of the native race” and called for the “potential equality” of Aboriginals to be recognised.\(^{36}\) Whilst the UA and the UAW sometimes collaborated on campaigns, including equal pay, and there was some crossover of membership, with Street, Lucy Woodcock, Muriel Tribe and Henrietta Greville holding dual membership, the UAW was particularly active in Aboriginal rights. The UAW’s campaigns on Aboriginal rights alongside groups such as the UA demonstrated that their cross-racial collaboration did, in some cases, cross class lines; Lake writes that Street, with a background of work in support of Aboriginal rights, was “best placed to effect the necessary convergence between maternalist feminism and leftist assimilationists.”\(^ {37}\) Other earlier women’s groups supporting Aboriginal issues included the Australian Women’s National League, the Women’s International League of Peace and Freedom (WILPF) and the Presbyterian Women’s Missionary Union; Richard Broome noting the work of these groups as “philanthropic and maternal as well as political.”\(^ {38}\)

There are a number of ways, then, in which the work of the UAW in their support of Aboriginal issues, before 1967, differed from other women’s organisations. This work can be viewed in four areas: social justice, human rights, political equality and land rights.

**Social Justice**

Much of the work of the UAW towards racial equality in Australia addressed issues of social injustice, on a case-by-case basis – the difficulty of Aboriginal women being able to source fresh food for their family, the lack of kindergarten care for Aboriginal children, or the services refused to many Aboriginal people throughout the nation. Their work on such cases included delegations to politicians, letters, representations and presentation of evidence to government commissions, organisation and involvement in protests, publicity in mainstream and left-wing and trade union media, seminars on Aboriginal rights, and gathering support for petitions and campaigns. By 1957, state and national UAW conferences passed resolutions

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on Aboriginal civil rights, staying in close contact with Aboriginal organisations as they were established.\textsuperscript{39}

UAW conferences and celebrations for International Women’s Day (IWD) often included guest speakers, discussions and presentations on the ongoing work for Aboriginal rights.\textsuperscript{40} Branches organised fundraising events, including an essay competition and a children’s concert in 1965 for the Aborigines Progressive Association’s (APA) hostel and scholarship fund.\textsuperscript{41} Members collected donations of clothing for the Bush Nursing Scheme, and when Aboriginal settlements had been affected by natural disasters.\textsuperscript{42}

UAW members held events for Aboriginal organisations as fundraising and networking opportunities, often holding meetings in members’ homes, screening films on Aboriginal issues and hosting guest speakers.\textsuperscript{43} Branches throughout NSW commemorated the Aboriginal Day of Mourning each year. Faith Bandler was the guest speaker at the Newcastle branch’s 1958 Day of Mourning event, when the group also screened a film exposing the living conditions of some Western Australian Aboriginal families. As a result, resolutions were passed protesting the establishment of the Woomera Rocket Range, and the “general plight” of Aboriginal Australians.\textsuperscript{44}

The UAW journal \textit{Our Women} publicised Aboriginal issues prominently. Articles such as “Women Who Lead Their People” profiled the activism of Kath Walker (later Oodgeroo Noonuccal), Ruth Wallace and Dairy Bindi, Gladys O’Shane and other UAW members. \textit{Our Women} writers contributed articles on “Aboriginal Advancement,” conferences, petitions, minimum wages for Aboriginal rural workers, and lists of “Recommended Reading.” They printed poems and short stories by Walker and others, and articles on daily life for Aboriginal people across the country, plus interviews with leaders including Dexter Daniels, Captain Major, Gladys Elphick, Shirley Andrews and Gladys O’Shane.

Encouraged by the first AAF Conference held in NSW in 1961, which called for the abolition of the NSW Aborigines Protection Act, there was a sharp upswing in UAW activity in Aboriginal activism. The period was

\textsuperscript{39} See, for instance, correspondence between the UAW and the Aboriginal–Australian Fellowship, AAF collection, MLMSS 4057, Box 15, State Library of NSW (SLNSW).


\textsuperscript{41} “Television Stars at ICD Concert,” \textit{Tribune}, 12 May 1965, 8.

\textsuperscript{42} Ethel Ley, UAW, to Jack Horner, AAF, 17 July 1961, AAF Collection, MLMSS 4057, Box 15, SLNSW; UAW Qld Committee of Management, Minutes, 24 February 1964, Union of Australian Women Collection, UQFL193, Box 1, FL-UQL.

\textsuperscript{43} Jack Horner, AAF, to Freda Brown, Secretary UAW, 23 July 1963, AAF Collection, MLMSS 4057, Box 15, SLNSW.

\textsuperscript{44} “News from Newcastle,” \textit{Tribune}, 16 July 1958, 11.
marked by a focus on Aboriginal social justice issues at their National Conference, a number of campaigns and actions in all states, and regular coverage of Aboriginal rights issues in Our Women, with the June–August 1961 issue devoted to the subject.

As well as activities like gathering petition signatures, members often took practical action themselves. In 1964, the UAW in NSW took up the case of Fred Morgan and Roy Hickey, two ten-year-old Aboriginal Walgett boys who had been gaol for petty theft and taken away from their parents. UAW National Secretary Freda Brown and the UAW, along with many in the trade union movement, led the fight for the return of the boys to their homes. Brown visited the children whilst they were in custody, and UAW Sydney women looked after their mothers whilst they were in Sydney trying to get their sons back.

While the involvement of UAW women in the Purfleet rent strike of 1960 has been detailed previously, it merits some attention here as it provides a case study of a characteristic type of social justice action within the organisation. UAW Newcastle branch and National Executive member Barbara Curthoys, Secretary of the Newcastle UAW (and later a historian of the organisation), led the union support for the rights of people living at the Purfleet Mission near Taree. Curthoys has detailed her part in the strike as part of the NSW UAW’s history; accounts of the strike also appear in some histories and memoirs. Purfleet had been established by the Aboriginal Protection Board in 1900, and until 1932 was controlled by missionaries. In 1960, there were over 200 people living there, but were entirely overcrowded in only 31 houses. The houses lacked fencing, baths and sinks, were only lined with hessian sacks, and were fitted with inadequate pump showers, and there was no electricity. In the early part of that year, the residents had gone through a terrible gastroenteritis epidemic, with three babies dying and many more residents ill and hospitalised. Horace Saunders, the father of one of the babies who had died, had refused to pay rent a number of years previously, in response to the appalling living conditions – not an


uncommon phenomenon throughout the state. “Our houses were made of bark, the roof was a bark roof ... there was no footpaths.” Now he had been served a notice to evict.

Barbara Curthoys and her colleague Esther Aarons, an organiser for the Hotel, Club and Restaurant Union, were touring northern NSW in a recruitment drive. Their car broke down at Purfleet and while they waited for assistance, they learnt about the horrific living conditions and Saunders’ rent issue. Curthoys “was very disturbed by the treatment of the people we met and very impressed with some of them.” She later wrote, “this was the first time I’d come in contact with an Aboriginal mission and it was an eye-opener.” She was incensed by the living conditions there, and the power of the Mission superintendent over the residents, and began campaigning for publicity and support. Horace Saunders recalled the rent strike: “The only support I got on it, the Trades Union in Newcastle they supported me.” “They backed me and that helped.” A week later, Curthoys and other UAW members returned to Purfleet by the invitation of the residents. She recalled: “we found out that there were eighteen of the twenty-six families who refused to pay rent and the reason why.”

Reporting to the UAW on her work at Purfleet, Curthoys was explicit in exploring the best ways of supporting such campaigns: “as a woman’s organisation how can we base ourselves on what Aboriginal women think should be done?” With the support of her UAW branch members and other unionists, she established the Newcastle Trades Hall Council’s Aboriginal Advancement Committee to support the strikers, and began a fighting fund, to which the Sydney and Newcastle UAW branches contributed. Ella Simon, a Purfleet resident who helped to establish the Purfleet Aboriginal branch of the Country Women’s Association (CWA), was a cousin of Saunders, and wrote that he said the unionists “were the

51. Barbara Curthoys UAW, Letter to Jack Horner, AAF, 13 June 1960, AAF Collection, MLMSS 4057, Box 15, SLNSW.
53. Horace Saunders, interview with Randall Wiggers, 25 August 1989, 18, Newcastle Oral History Collection, A6971 (i), University of Newcastle.
only ones who’d offered any help.”57 Whilst Saunders was later evicted, the case had brought valuable publicity, and support, for the Purfleet community. Simon wrote that “everything seemed to happen in just one year – 1960. It was as though the heavens had opened. We got our stoves. We got a footpath. Suddenly there was water and electricity and even the pre-school was started.”58 Another Purfleet resident, Marjorie Maher, whose interview was featured in the *Our Women* issue dedicated to Aboriginal issues, said that “we would have fought all along, but there was no one to help. We need moral support and the Unions and women like yourselves have given it to us.”59 One of the main achievements of Curthoys was through her networking capabilities; her skills to enlist the wider support of the Trades Hall Council was a natural extension of her work in the UAW. She wrote that, “in the course of the campaign the UAW … members had all learnt a great deal about the *Aborigines Protection Act* of NSW, and the arbitrary nature of the enforced ‘assimilation’ of Aborigines into white society.”60

Largely because of Curthoys’s activity around the Purfleet case, all UAW branches became better informed and more active around Aboriginal issues more generally, the NSW Annual Report for 1960–61 commenting on the supportive role of UAW members and their quest for first-hand information: “the significant side of this interesting event is that the aborigine people formed their own organisation and with the help of the trade unions, UAW and others won an important victory.”61 The contributions of UAW members to the Purfleet campaign demonstrates the open-minded attitude of UAW non-Aboriginal members, their willingness to persist in solving social problems, and their networking with members of other organisations that was so successful in such work. Curthoys’s initiative was to work alongside Aboriginal women, and to use existing UAW avenues such as meetings and *Our Women* to inform others.

In the UAW, Aboriginal women were conceptualised within the mainstream concept of women’s rights, and were asked to join as members and executives. This development of women’s interest in Aboriginal affairs was premised on a socialist framework of unity amongst women. Within their broader philosophy, the UAW offered a space for Aboriginal women – just as it did for working-class women, housewives, and “New Australians” – to find their voice and join their campaigns for equality and improved living conditions. Aboriginal members were never in a majority, however; Ann

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58. Ibid., 83.
60. Curthoys and McDonald, *More than a Hat and Glove Brigade*, 64.
Curthoys writes that the UAW was able successfully to encourage some Aboriginal women to join “until it became clear that Aboriginal women preferred to form their own organisations,” many of which were established in the 1950s.62 This included the Purfleet CWA Branch, whose members did much to improve life at Purfleet.63

A smaller area of work for the UAW surrounded educational opportunity. Branches raised funds for Aboriginal scholarships with the Australian Board of Missions, and, later, Abschol Aboriginal Scholarships (a committee of the National Union of Australian University Students). In 1957, when Tranby College began operating as an Aboriginal training organisation in Sydney, the UAW National Committee adopted it as their official charity, and regularly donated towards a scholarship for an Aboriginal girl to train for “the trade or profession of her choice.”64

**Human Rights**

International condemnation of Australia’s unjust treatment of Aboriginals under the United Nation’s 1948 UDHR was part of the founding ethos of the UAW. From its establishment, the UAW was affiliated with an international organisation, the Women’s International Democratic Federation (WIDF), a non-government, anti-racist and anti-imperialist organisation that had worked towards the inclusion of members from all nations since its founding in 1945. The transnational activism that the UAW gained from its WIDF affiliation brought human rights arguments to their Aboriginal activism.

From its establishment, the UAW supported the improvement of human rights, and this is in line with early coalition politics actions. Internal documents as well as local and national newsletters and *Our Women* included information about the UDHR and Australia’s work in this area.65 The history of UAW is filled with instances of the petitioning of state and federal governments using explicit human rights arguments. In 1951, for example, the UAW supported a campaign against the treatment of strike

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63. For more on the establishment and work of the Purfleet CWA Branch, see Jennifer Jones, “Cross-Racial Collaboration in the Country Women’s Association,” in *Historicising Whiteness: Transnational Perspectives on the Construction of an Identity* (Melbourne: RMIT Publishing in association with the School of Historical Studies, University of Melbourne, 2007), 179–89.
65. See, for instance, the documents in Z236 Federal Office, Boxes 9, 38, 113, 119, NBAC; UAW Queensland Branch Collection, UQFL193, Box 13, FL-UQL.
leader Fred Waters, who was exiled from his home in the Northern Territory by the Director of Native Affairs. Their support was part of a broader union campaign. The UAW claimed the Director’s action breached Australia’s obligations under the UDHR, specifically articles 9 (freedom from arbitrary arrest or detention), 12 (freedom from interference with privacy, home and communication) and 13 (right to freedom of movement).

The 1963 UAW seminar to prepare for the WIDF World Congress of Women (in Moscow) was explicit in its support for Aboriginal rights as human rights, with Jack Horner, Ray Peckham and other activists participating. The seminar made a number of resolutions supporting equal rights and self-determination for Aboriginal people. In thanking Horner for his contribution to the seminar, UAW National Secretary Freda Brown – who would later become the President of WIDF – wrote: “we feel that we should let you know that the help we received from you and other people active in the movement for Aboriginal advancement was responsible for the outstanding success” of the seminar.

The resolutions from this seminar, emphasising the Australian governments’ repeated contraventions of the UDHR in their treatment of Aboriginal Australians, were presented to the WIDF Congress, with 1,500 delegates representing 113 countries. When the delegation returned from Moscow, its leader Freda Brown reported that “the Australian delegation of thirteen were especially pleased that their propositions on the struggle of the Aborigine people ... were included in the Congress findings.” This had discomfited the Australian security service, however: the head of the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation noted that Brown’s work in Moscow exposed “how Aboriginal people are discriminated against.”

Political Equality

An issue related to the UAW’s campaigns for improved human rights for Aboriginal Australians was political equality. The governments of Australian states had exercised complete control over the lives of Aboriginal

69. Freda Brown, UAW, Letter to Jack Horner, AAF, 12 June 1963, AAF Collection, MLMSS 4057, Box 15, SLNSW.
71. CCF Spry, Letter to Secretary, Department of Immigration, 2 August 1963, A1209, 1963: 6602, 22, National Archive of Australia, Canberra.
people for many years through various Aboriginal Protection Acts and Boards. The UAW, along with other organisations, protested against the powers of these laws in each state and territory. Although amended a number of times over its history, the 1909 NSW Aborigines Protection Act gave the government extraordinary powers to interfere in the lives of Aboriginal people. Although this Act was not repealed until 1969, when the Aborigines Welfare Board was abolished following many social and cultural changes after the end of World War II, the Australian government changed its policy to emphasise assimilation. Government advice on assimilation explained that Aboriginal Australians “must live and work and think as white Australians do so that they can take their place in social, economic and political equality with the rest of the Australian community.”

This last issue, of political equality for Aboriginals, was another area of work for UAW members, who explicitly included Aboriginal Australians in their campaigns for increased maternity and child endowment, pensions, housing and other benefits legally afforded to other Australians. In 1956, the UAW launched a Mother and Child campaign for increased child endowment and maternity allowances, and to change laws that prohibited these from being directly paid to Aboriginal mothers. Working with groups including the Australian Women’s Charter and the AAF, they organised a large delegation to Canberra just before the 1958 Budget was handed down; the delegation emphasised payments to Aboriginal mothers.

UAW members also collaborated with other groups to strengthen their campaigns for political equality. In 1962, for instance, UAW member Shirley Andrews compiled extensive data on low wages for Aboriginal pastoral workers for the 1962 FCAA conference, with reference to regulations of the International Labour Organisation. Patterns of development in the UAW’s work in political rights generally paralleled their campaigns in other areas.

**Land Rights**

The UAW embraced land rights as an explicit campaign much later than its activism for civil and human rights, with its support of the Wave Hill strike beginning in 1967. As Foley and Anderson detail, this was the beginning of

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72. For one study on the interactions of Aboriginal women and Boards, see Heather Goodall, “‘Assimilation Begins in the Home’: The State and Aboriginal Women’s Work as Mothers in New South Wales, 1900s to 1960s,” *Labour History*, no. 69 (1995): 75–101.


land rights campaigns in Australia; Bain Attwood traces the beginning of
the use of the term “land rights” to the Yirrkala petitions to the Australian
Parliament in 1963.75 Whilst the UAW’s work in this area is, then, outside
the scope of this article, Barbara Curthoys, in her history of the UAW, takes
pains to note that the UAW was one of many organisations that supported
campaigns such as land rights.76 Members who supported this cause
included foundation UAW member Helen Hambly, who was also a member
of the CPA, WILPF and the APA.77 Hambly had come to support Aboriginal
rights early in her activist career, and at one time was “the only white
person at that time that they had” in the APA.78 On the support of people
on the left for Aboriginal rights, Hambly commented that Aboriginal
activists “felt the strength of the trade union movement and they learned
to organise in the white society and they learned the importance of getting
that kind of support … and they did realise that they needed some support
and assistance in the white community before they could succeed.”79 She
also explained, “We, those of us who were trying to change things for the
Aborigines, who walked down the streets with placards and – we did it
because the Aborigines couldn’t, they weren’t able to do it, they weren’t
allowed.”80

On an invitation from Aboriginal activists including Pearl Gibbs and
Dick Hunter, Hambly began making trips to rural areas in a number of
states to investigate Aboriginal people’s living conditions. “And once seeing
that, feeling it and knowing it, you just can’t turn your back on it … our
government was responsible. They were wards of the State. And we, we’ve
got a dreadful history and a shame there, but we must face up to it, recognise
it.”81 When she went on the trips, she took care to delineate her role: “I
was the only non-Aboriginal that they asked to go with them, but I went
on condition that I didn’t vote or have, make decisions for them; that we
discussed and talked about things, but they, they were the ones that made
the decisions.”82 She returned to Sydney to share her findings with other

(Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2003), 215; Commonwealth of Australia, *House of
77. I acknowledge Professor Heather Goodall’s generosity in providing interview
transcripts of her talks with Hambly.
78. Helen Hambly, interview with Heather Goodall, 10 October 1989.
activists, and, along with working with other members of her organisations, published articles in Our Women and the CPA’s Tribune.

In 1960, Hambly became involved in a dispute at Coonamble, where the Aborigines Welfare Board had been blocked by the Shire Council from buying land to build houses. Many of the Council members and townspeople “wanted Aborigines just to go away.” Hambly points out that “of course, we must remember too that this was during the time of the big struggles in America of Little Rock and these places, where there was quite a lot of publicity in our papers far more than we could get about Aborigines. And there began,” she said, “to be a fear about publicity that wasn’t the kind that they wanted up there.” Even the mainstream Sydney Morning Herald commented that “the scandal of Coonamble is an unpleasant reminder that we allow them [Aboriginals] to live in sub-human conditions.” Whilst with support from members of the AAF and other organisations the houses were eventually built, segregation, poor housing and racism remained in Coonamble as it did in many parts of the nation.

When Hambly returned from one of her regional NSW trips, which she had taken with Ray Peckham and other activists to learn about Aboriginal lives and struggles, she concluded that what Aboriginal people wanted was “their own land, their reserves held in common, full citizenship and an end to discrimination – not assimilation, but the advance of the Aborigine people as a whole.” Because of her experience in travelling through regional NSW and working with Aboriginal communities for civil rights, Hambly was able to later advise Charles Perkins “where to go and the best route for the freedom ride.”

The work of the UAW in the four areas discussed above demonstrates their relationships with other organisations, and their willingness to include the problems of Aboriginal Australians in their campaigns. In these areas, members of the UAW worked for, and alongside, Aboriginal women, and forged productive relationships. This article now turns to brief accounts of four Aboriginal UAW members in NSW, drawing out ways in which their membership of the UAW was beneficial to the women and their campaigns.

83. On the Coonamble incident, see Cecil Homes, “A Town Finds Its Conscience,” People, 26 October 1960, 36–38; Goodall, Invasion to Embassy, 283–86.
84. Helen Hambly, interview with Heather Goodall, 15 August 1989.
88. Accounts of UAW Aboriginal members in other states is part of the author’s ongoing research.
Four Aboriginal UAW Members

Pearl Gibbs (1901–83) has long been acknowledged as a pioneer of Aboriginal rights. She was the first Aboriginal member of the UAW. She was born in Sydney, and later lived in many parts of NSW, including Dubbo, where she joined the CPA. Writer Len Fox, a friend, insists that “it was Pearl, more than anyone else in NSW, who insisted that organisation and agitation for her people must continue, must grow.” She helped to form the APA in 1937, and to organise the Day of Mourning, coinciding with the 1938 sesquicentenary celebrations. She took an intersectional approach to her activism for Aboriginal citizenship, working for inclusion through both race and gender; she wrote that “we Aboriginal women are intelligent enough to ask for the same citizenship rights and conditions of life as our white sisters.”

In 1954, Gibbs was the first woman to be elected to the Aborigines Welfare Board. Faith Bandler believed that Gibbs had been keen to establish the AAF in 1955 because she felt that the Council for Aboriginal Rights (CAR) was “dominated by the communists.” One of Australia’s most prominent and consistent activists for Aboriginal rights from the 1920s until her death in 1983, Gibbs was a member of at least 13 groups, and, as Stephanie Gilbert writes, her networking within such a rich activist arena strengthened her work. Like the UAW, many of these groups drew white sympathisers, from militant left-wing unionists to more diversely motivated people; Heather Goodall writes that “Pearl Gibbs became a link between the white women’s and Aboriginals’ movements.”

Gibbs joined the UAW at its establishment in 1950; the next year she was elected to the UAW NSW Management Committee, demonstrating the UAW’s acknowledgement of her leadership skills, and was a member for many years. At the UAW’s first conference, she spoke about not being a citizen of the country she was born in, along with her sons who had served in World War II. She “outlined the disabilities suffered by Aborigines on voting, and receiving such social services as old age and invalid pensions, the baby bonus, hospital treatment,” and called for an end to discrimination against Aborigines. As always, Gibbs demanded that non-Aboriginal Australians understand the practical, as well as cultural and social, disadvantages that existed. A motion was carried calling on the Government to implement a policy of equal rights for people of Aboriginal blood, and sympathetic assistance to tribal Aborigines.\textsuperscript{96} The ASIO operative attending this conference reported that Gibbs was “very bitter at the treatment of the Aboriginal.”\textsuperscript{97} Gibbs worked with non-Aboriginal people, and often spoke alongside other prominent UAW women and CPA members, including on the Democratic Rights Council platform.\textsuperscript{98} She outlined her plans for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal women to work together for justice in a 1956 \textit{Our Women} interview.\textsuperscript{99} And at the 1957 UAW’s IWD celebration, she was feted as the guest of honour, again being recognised by that organisation for her leadership, knowledge and strength.

Louise West (1913–83), a Sydney UAW member through the 1950s, had joined the CPA in 1942 – one of just a few Aboriginal people to do so. “[T]o me,” she recalled, “the Party was the champion of all oppressed people.”\textsuperscript{100} Her work within the CPA and the UAW concurrently was also a characteristic of a number of other UAW members. West was the Surry Hills branch secretary, and, later, as her political education progressed, she became a tutor in Marxism at the branch. She criticised the 1940s Party line on Aboriginal issues: “at that time the CPA only regarded tribal people as Aborigines – the rest of us were on the lowest rung of the proletarian ladders and were treated the same as the poorest whites. No one considered that we had any identity or culture.”\textsuperscript{101} She acknowledged, however, that “one thing the Party can take credit for was the \textit{Tribune} was running articles on

\textsuperscript{96} “Sympathy Not Enough: Moving Appeal to Women’s Meeting,” \textit{Northern Standard}, 30 November 1951, 6.
\textsuperscript{97} Pearl Gibbs ASIO file, 77, NAA 6126/302, National Archives of Australia (NAA), Canberra.
\textsuperscript{98} Pearl Gibbs ASIO file, 49, NAA 6126/302, NAA.
\textsuperscript{101} Ibid.
Aborigines when nobody else would touch the subject.”  

In 1965, when members of the Student Action for Aborigines “Freedom Ride” campaign arrived in Walgett to fight against racial segregation in that town’s Luxury Theatre, West travelled there from Sydney as the UAW representative, along with Ray Peckham and Eric Woods from the APA.

Much has been written about the work of UAW member Faith Bandler (1918–2015), who devoted a great deal of her life to building organisations that worked for the rights of Aboriginal Australians. Marilyn Lake recognises that Bandler, who played an important role in Aboriginal politics, was “crucial in winning the support of feminists for the dismantling of the discriminatory apparatus of the Aborigines Protection Act.” Stephanie Gilbert writes that Pearl Gibbs persuaded Bandler to “draw on her many contacts” to support the AAF. As a member of the AAF and with her formative work (alongside Victorian UAW member Shirley Andrews) in the establishment of the Federal Council for Advancement of Aborigines (FCAA), which changed its name to FCAATSI in 1964, Bandler’s emphasis was on bringing a wider community to the Aboriginal cause. She was a very important connection between the UAW and the AAF, and she spoke at UAW gatherings all over the country for many years. Bandler talked about the work of women, black and white, in striving for social justice, and emphasised how this type of activism brought a certain amount of disapprobation:

Those women worked in the unpopular cause of equal status for women. All were protagonists for women’s rights and all to some measure influenced my thinking about freedom and independence for women … black rights were an unpopular cause and few people wanted to be associated with a “cause” that might brand them as communist.

Like many other UAW members who worked with a number of organisations, Monica Clare (1924–73), of Wollongong in NSW, was a UAW and CPA member, the Secretary of the regional International Women’s Day committee and a member of the Wollongong May Day committee. She was also secretary of the South Coast Aborigines Committee of the South Coast Labor Council, and was founding secretary of the Illawarra Tribal Council. After attending a creative writing course, Clare began writing her memoirs. Fellow UAW member Mavis Miller said that Clare explicitly used her writing as a political tool, to reveal “how her life had been, and to let people

102. Ibid.
103. Louise West, Report to UAW, September 1965, Z236, Box 9, NBAC.
105. Gilbert, “Never Forgotten,” 120.
know how the Aborigines were treated … to expose that situation.” After her death in 1973, Jack Horner at FCAATSI edited Clare’s story, *Karobran: The Story of an Aboriginal Girl*, publishing it in 1978. Until 1991, it was the only published novel by an Aboriginal woman. Jennifer Jones believes that “foundational Aboriginal women writers such as Monica Clare and Margaret Tucker forged long-term coalitions with white political groups and their ideological structures: particularly CPA-aligned ‘united front’ groups … from these communities of commitment they drew support that aided and shaped their autobiographical narratives.” Clare’s activist work was a shining example of the coalition politics of the period, and the UAW was but one of the beneficiaries.

**Conclusions**

Whilst the work of many activists in the assimilation period has received academic attention, as this article details, the achievements of the UAW in creating productive relationships to further Aboriginal rights has not been studied until now. The UAW became a place of opportunity for Aboriginal support in the women’s organisations of its time, building on the work of earlier groups and taking full advantage of the coalition politics of the period. Kath Walker/Oodgeroo Noonuccal believed that, in the long and unfinished fight for Aboriginal rights in Australia, “it was the women who spearheaded the movement” and that they worked so well “to such an extent that the men got behind us.” The UAW provided a voice for Aboriginal women activists, both within and outside its organisation, and was a key communicator for the Aboriginal women activists highlighted in this article, along with others, to inform white working-class and middle-class women of their unequal treatment. The pioneering women’s organisation drew on human rights legislation to frame its support for Aboriginal rights.

Whilst the national organisation of the UAW closed in 1995, and the Victorian branch is the only one still active in 2018, the close personal connections that were made between UAW members and members of other Aboriginal rights organisations had practical and long-lasting benefits beyond the assimilation era. The UAW leadership believed that the best way their members could help was “to get to know more aborigine women, invite them to join our organisation, learn to understand their problems,

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give them what assistance we can, but, above all, to encourage them to fight for their rights as citizens.” 110 As this article has demonstrated, the women of the UAW were an early interracial non-partisan organisation working to publicise and condemn unjust treatment of Australian Aboriginal citizens.

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