$175,000 FOR WAVE HILL HERITAGE PRECINCT TO SUPPORT INDIGENOUS TOURISM AND JOBS

$175,000 has been allocated to support a project of the Daguragu Community Government Council to permanently commemorate the August 1966 Wave Hill Walk Off and Strike, Local Government Minister Elliot McAdam and Infrastructure and Transport Minister Dr Chris Burns announced today.

“The Wave Hill Walk Off and Strike is one of the most significant events in modern Territory history,” said Mr McAdam.

“What began as a strike against appalling labour and living conditions developed into an action that arguably began the modern land rights movement.

“The Daguragu Community Council, on behalf of the Gurindji and other people who participated in the Strike, approached us to assist in bringing their story to the world, in particular the increasing number of tourists who travel down the Buntine Highway.

“The work will restore the grave of strike leader, Vincent Lingiari, whose burial site is now represented by a star picket and a steel tag merely marked ‘Vincent L’.

“It will also restore and mark the graves of those buried at Jinbarrak, the old camp site on Wave Hill Station from which people walked off, as well as the many heroes of the strike that have subsequently been buried at Kalkarindji.”

Infrastructure and Transport Minister Dr Chris Burns said he was very pleased to assist the Gurindji people in their commemoration of the Wave Hill Walk-off.

“The allocation of funds to construct a new truck parking area in Kalkarindji will allow the existing parking bay to become the site of a cultural centre and visitors’ precinct,” he said.

“This will mean Kalkarindji will develop into more than just a petrol station on the side of the road, but an important tourist destination commemorating Territory history in its own right.

“The issue of regional development is an important part of this Government’s strategy, and initiatives such as this from Daguragu Community Government Council are important elements in building economic activity in the bush.”

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BACKGROUND TO THE WAVE HILL WALK OFF AND STRIKE, 23 AUGUST 1966

The famous Walk Off and Strike by Gurindji and other stock workers from the British Vestey-owned Wave Hill Station was arguably the beginning of the modern land rights movement.

While recovering in hospital in Darwin with a broken leg as a result of a work injury incurred on Wave Hill, Gurindji leader Vincent Lingiari* was visited by Dexter Daniels, an Aboriginal organiser with the North Australian Workers Union. They discussed working conditions at Wave Hill and an earlier strike at Newcastle Waters in May 1966.

At the time, stockmen and their families at Wave Hill lived under appalling conditions. Housing was in tin humpies with no sanitation or running water. Payment for work was largely in rations of flour, tea and tobacco. Wages were well below that paid to non-Aboriginal workers. Women, if they had paid work at all, got even less money working as gardeners, cooks or housemaids. In the words of Hoppy Mick Rangiari, they were “treated like dogs”.

For the Gurindji and people from other tribal groups at Wave Hill, the promise of equal wages made in early 1966 (but delayed until December 1967), was too little too late. On his return, Vincent gathered his people together and the whole camp went out on strike and walked off Wave Hill. It was a very hot and dry year in 1966, with the 200+ group walking to Wave Hill to seek a camp at Police Hole, on the Victoria River just below the police station. On the way, they had to dig for water at Gordy Creek. Babies were carried in coolamons, people walked off with little more than swags and the clothes on their backs. It was a strike that, despite attempts to bribe the workers back, and pressure from the government, was to last for nine years. The Gurindji, as a tribe, never worked for Vestey again.

After some months at Police Hole (Wankurt), the group then walked to Wattie Creek—Daguragu—as a permanent township, initially occupying the land by virtue of a mining exploration lease held by the “Gurindji Mining Company”. By this time, the action had escalated to encompass demands for the return of their traditional lands. As Vincent Lingiari put it to Hannah Middleton: “now we want our land back”.

The strike received initial support from trade unionists and communists in Darwin, who ran supplies of food and later building materials in an old Blitz truck. Support became national, with vigils held outside the Vestey headquarters in Sydney and fund raising events held in many capital cities. On these trips, Lingiari was accompanied by younger men who acted as interpreters; the communist writer, Frank Hardy, espoused their cause, writing the book The Unlucky Australians as a result. One public meeting at Sydney Town Hall was attended by Fred Hollows, who was so moved by the quietly spoken Gurindji leader that he donated $500, and changed his life to one of passionate interest in Aboriginal health. As an eye surgeon, he was later to save the sight of hundreds of Aboriginal people—including that of Lingiari.

It was not until 1975 that the then Prime Minister, Gough Whitlam, returned land to the Gurindji at a ceremony at Daguragu in which he famously poured a handful of dirt into Lingiari’s hands as a symbol of the return of at least part of traditional Gurindji lands under Australian law. Equally famously, Lingiari said “we can all be mates, now” in response. The Aboriginal Land Rights Act was passed in 1976 by the succeeding Fraser Government.

The communities of Kalkarindji and Daguragu have been holding annual commemorations of the Wave Hill Walk Off and Strike since 1983.

* pronounced with a soft “ng” as in ‘sing’