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Cotton chippers to strike on 'slave labor'

ABORIGINALS are organising a strike by cotton chippers in the NSW cotton-growing centre of Wee Waa next Monday to protest at working and living conditions.

Nine Aboriginal leaders meeting in Sydney yesterday said the cotton chippers — 90 per cent of them blacks — work 10 hours a day for little more than \$1 an hour.

The group, which calls itself the Cotton Chippers' Caucus, decided at the weekend to form a union to protect itinerant farm workers from what they describe as "slave labor conditions."

A Sydney spokesman for the group, Mr Paul Coe, said yesterday: "We believe if a white man was working under conditions like those in Wee Waa the unions would be up in arms."

He said: "People are being paid \$1.16 an hour for 10 hours work, five days a week."

"They're exploited in the fields and they are exploited in the township where prices go up during the three-month chipping season."

"After they finish work they have to go back to shanties without toilet facilities and no recreation."

Mr Coe said local medical authorities had told him there could be a major epidemic if conditions of Aboriginal workers were not improved.

Other members of the caucus said workers were collapsing daily from heat exhaustion in temperatures as high as 48C (120F).

1000 WORKERS

Mr Coe said the strike, which would involve about 1000 workers, would depend on donations sent to the Aboriginal Legal Service.

He estimated the union of itinerant workers would represent 10,000 farm workers, including whites.

On Friday, chippers at Glencoe cotton farm outside Wee Waa stopped work for 24 hours in a protest over wages and conditions.

Yesterday, the manager of Glencoe, Mr Paul Kahl, said: "The workers were coerced off the field by outside intimidation. We give our workers \$1.20 an hour take-home pay and each worker averages three to four days work a week."

"The camping conditions are poor and this is a problem for the State, the Federal Government and the local council to deal with."

The operations manager of the Wee Waa Cotton Co-operative Ltd, Mr Greg Lynch, said most cotton chippers were "very happy" with their conditions.

"It is quite untrue to say they are working in slave labor conditions. They work under the State Cotton Employees Award which pays them \$1.16 an hour, and time and a half after eight hours," he said.

"Most of them work a 10-hour shift, but they work on average only two to four days a week."

Mr Lynch said a small group of "stirrers" from outside had tried to create trouble.

Mr Lynch said the award was now being renegotiated. It had expired in December and the Australian Workers Union had filed a new log of claims, he said.