

Power to the cotton chippers

By BOBBI SYKES

PERHAPS someone should tell the *Australian* that the government has changed, and that Labor policy towards blacks is a little different than the previous governments.

The *Australian's* report of the "aboriginal embassy" angered blacks, and it wasn't until the then opposition leader, Gough Whitlam, chose to recognise the embassy, and actually sat down on the lawn with the representatives, that the *Australian* chose to report the embassy with the seriousness it deserved.

However, the *Australian* is adopting the same style of reporting as they did in the bad old days, with regard to matters which blacks view as serious. *Aboriginal "slaves" to form union*, ran the leader of a six inch report on an extremely volatile situation which exists in Wee Waa, western New South Wales.

Maybe the *Australian* considers dubious the word "slaves" by which blacks in this area chose to describe themselves, but for these people, slavery is the *only* word which can describe their conditions — and it accurately paints the picture of the conditions which do exist there.

For some years now urban blacks have been investigating conditions in Wee Waa, and trying to do something about them. Under the Liberal government though, such efforts were futile and frustrated. Under the Labor government it is expected that their efforts should not only be supported, but that conditions such as exist at Wee Waa be completely exposed and eradicated.

For three months of the year, approximately 1000

black cotton chippers are employed to chip the weeds between the rows of cotton. For most, this will be the only employment they are able to find for the entire year. They work for 10 hours a day and are paid \$12 a day, though child labor in the form of waterboys from ages eight to nine are paid considerably less.

This year, for the first time, business minded townsmen, not the employers, have made available a number of battered, secondhand caravans at \$22-25 per week. Very primitive facilities exist to allow residents who occupy these caravans to shower or wash clothes, and at one such ripoff park, two toilets are shared by all the caravan residents.

In the fields, however, there are no toilet facilities, and the nearest toilet is sometimes up to five miles away. This loses a lot of time, therefore they drop their pants right there in plain view between the rows of cotton. Since children often accompany their parents (both mother and father work while the work is available) and play between the rows, the rate of dysentery and similar infections is extremely high.

American managers operate the cottonfields, and many Americanisms have been imported to ensure labor wastage is reduced to a minimum. One which angers the blacks is the use of binoculars by patrollers to watch that workers are not resting for a few minutes.

Over the past three weeks, temperatures in the cottonfields have been terrible and a number of cotton chippers have dropped dead from heat exhaustion and dehydration.

The Sydney *Mirror* (Janu-



Paul Coe — investigating racism complaints

ary 10) described the ten people who died as middle-aged and in poor physical condition. Their ages actually ranged from 34, which cannot be said to be *middle-aged* for anyone else but blacks, whose life expectancy in this country is 47.

Sol Bellear, field officer, and Paul Coe, law student, both employees of the Sydney Aboriginal Legal Service, went into the area this week to carry out investigations following complaints of racist practices, and Bellear stated: "The entire town is racist, even the reactions which we received from people like the police, the hospital matron, and all other whites whom we had to approach in the course of our inquiries were racist."

No wonder the local townsmen were racist and hostile towards the black in-

vestigators, because a lot hidden from public view has been turned up during the course of their enquiries.

The hospital is segregated, and cotton chippers who are admitted are housed on the veranda. Of the two hotels, the Royal and the Imperial, the latter refuses to serve blacks. The proprietor, Mr C. P. Overall, who claims to run a "tight house" and who won't serve blacks to the detriment of his regular — white — patrons, however, says: At my discretion, aboriginals who are clean, properly dressed and well behaved are allowed to have a drink at the bar." Local blacks dispute this last statement.

Instead, stores have cashed in on the lucrative enterprise of helping to provide spirits (and death) to the blacks, at

greatly inflated prices. According to the Medical Officer for Health for the North West District, Dr P.A.M. van de Linde, methylated spirits drinking has become a serious social problem.

"It seems to be going a little too far, however, when methylated spirit is sold from cold storage," Dr van de Linde told newspaper reporters. (*Northern daily leader*, Jan 11).

A few years ago cotton growing was in the experimental stage at Wee Waa. It was thought by blacks even then to be of further, detriment to the people, heralding the American way of slavery. After a severe flood in the area, the federal government indicated its willingness to have this enterprise continue, by giving thousands of dollars of flood relief money to the managers and owners.

Not one cent, of course, was made available to or put to the benefit of the cotton chippers, and the promised on-the-job accommodation has not been provided, nor have any toilet facilities.

Eleven black representatives from Wee Waa and surrounding areas who called a press conference in Sydney on Wednesday, spoke of black disillusionment from years of apathy and double-talk from the AWU, and condemned the lack of action on their behalf by the ACTU. Calling

themselves the Black Cotton Chippers Caucus, they are exploring the possibility of establishing their own union, and claim they could expect a membership of 10,000 itinerant workers, both black and white.

The Cotton Chippers Caucus feels that the government has too lightly overlooked both their pre-election promises made to blacks and to the unemployed, and they hope to force the government into supporting them.

If the ACTU does swing its weight in behind the blacks, and with all the talking Bob Hawke has done in the past about "helping the blacks" they are almost obliged to, it will set a precedent. The ACTU in the past has only acted on matters referred to it by affiliated unions. They would, by their action, be recognising the federal aspect of the black struggle.

It is apparent that many unions, and union leaders, are willing to endorse radical statements and demands made by militant blacks, but for only as long as they are directed either at the government or someone other than themselves. Only a small minority even of the leftwing unions are willing to go further than lighten their pockets and pay lipservice by looking into the racism and racist neglect which exists within their own organisations.

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