

Aborigines in cottonfields 'exploited'

Aboriginal workers in NSW cottonfields were being exploited through child labour, low pay, and working conditions so bad that some workers had collapsed and died, according to a report from the Australian Council of Churches.

The report, prepared last week by the Reverend H. Herbert, of the ACC's NSW State council, was considered yesterday by the final plenary session of the Australian Council for Overseas Aid development education conference at the Canberra College of Advanced Education.

The Aborigines, who went on strike recently, were employed to chip weeds from cotton crops around Wee Waa in the Namoi River irrigation area.

The report said the cotton chippers were employed by contractors who received \$2 a day for each worker put into the field. The chippers were paid \$1.15 an hour for the first eight hours and time-and-a-half thereafter. Chippers worked 10 hours a day for up to six days a week and children frequently were employed.

"Compared with the pay and conditions of most Australian workers, there is no doubt that the chippers are being exploited", the report said. "If they worked a straight 40-hour week they would get about \$46 a week without benefits. This is below the minimum wage".

Temperatures in the fields often were so high that at least three people, including a 17-year-old boy, had collapsed and died this summer.

The report described housing conditions as "deplorable". Many lived in tents and "dirty scrappy camps" with so few taps that some Aborigines had to walk half a mile to get

drinking water. The river water was undrinkable.

The report said the white population of Wee Waa appeared to regard the Aborigines as "badly behaved" and felt that the situation had been under control until outsiders came and caused trouble.

Solidarity expressed

A resolution adopted by the conference expressed solidarity with the strikers and condemned the Federal Government, the NSW Government, the Australian Workers Union, and the Australian Council of Trade Unions for "failing to ensure civilised working and living conditions".

The resolution also demanded that the Government make suitable land and finance available for the Wee Waa Aborigines to set up their own enterprises.

A Department of Labour officer had been sent to Wee Waa to investigate the complaints of Aboriginal cotton chippers, the Minister for Labour, Mr Cameron, said in Canberra yesterday.

The NSW Labour Council has launched an appeal for financial aid for the strikers.

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