

***Australian Worker*, 10 May 1939, p. 15, Aborigines Want a Royal Commission. William Cooper, Honorary Secretary, Australian Aborigines' League, Letter to the Editor**

I was a member of the Shearers' Union from the time of its organisation until I got too old for work. I am now 78 years old. I was a subscriber to 'The Worker' all this time. I have now retired, about 24 years, and for the last 10 years of my life I have devoted my energies to the emancipation of my people, the aborigines. I feel that I have played my part in creating that favorable public opinion which now is seen toward my people, so much different from what it was.

I was active in the Union in the year of the call-out, 1890, on the Darling River, and in the big shearers strike in 1892. In the strike of 1894 I was on picket duty. I mention this and the fact that many others of my people have been loyal members of the Union, as many are still, to show that the appeal I am about to make is to our brother unionists.

Until the last few years we aborigines have had a rough spin, but our position is getting more tolerable in some parts of Australia. The State of New South Wales is an exception, and is the only one to treat our representations with discourtesy.

The administration of the aborigines is vested in the Aborigines' Protection Board, a misnomer. The officers of this Board are indifferent to our position, and those who are in the unfortunate position of being unemployed, and because aboriginal, cannot claim the dole, are entitled to a ration issue. This ration, of a value of little more than 4/- per week, a little over 2/- per week for growing children up to 14 years old, is so little in proportion to the bodily needs of the people that a state of semi-starvation is brought about. The time is ripe, and rotten ripe, for a thorough investigation into the New South Wales aboriginal position, and nothing short of a Royal Commission is likely to be satisfactory. A real change of heart, if not an entire change of the Board personnel, is needed.

We have asked for an impartial enquiry into our complaints, with the right to produce witnesses and to have assistance in putting our case, including the cross-examining of witnesses. We have asked the Board, later the Premier and the Chief Secretary. We got an acknowledgment of our correspondence, and an official came to Cumerroogunga. Six of the refugees were summoned to Cumerroogunga and were told that the Board supported the manager, and that if they did not return, their homes would be given to other aborigines (and some of these homes were built by and at the expense of the people themselves). The men were not allowed to speak. This is not an enquiry acceptable to us, and it should not be to any reasonable people.

An impartial enquiry — that is all we ask — and we will abide by the result. Failing this we ask for a reconstituted Board, with Aboriginal representation thereon.