



Information Sheet 11: The Pacific Islanders' Fund and the Misappropriation of the Wages of Deceased Pacific Islanders by the Queensland Government

62,475 indenture contracts were issued for Pacific Islanders to work as labourers in Queensland between 1863 and 1904. They travelled to Queensland on 807 voyages involving 80 islands in what is generally known as the Queensland labour trade to Melanesia. Given the rate of re-enlistments from the islands it seems likely that there were about 50,000 individuals involved. The vast majority (95 per cent) were adolescent and young adult males. In 1901 the Commonwealth government ordered the deportation of all Islanders in Australia: of the 10,000 resident in 1901, only around 1,500 remained in 1907, from whom the present-day Australian South Sea Islander community is descended.

The Queensland government's Pacific Islanders' Fund which operated between 1885 and the 1900s is unknown today. It was established in the Treasury in relation to the *Pacific Island Labourers Act 1880* through an 1885 Amendment Act to safeguard return fares and to ensure that the wages of deceased Islanders were returned to their families. However, over time, because of the high death rates, the wages of deceased Islanders became so substantial that they were able to be used to supplement the administration of the whole labour trade.

The 1880 Act introduced control over the wages of deceased Islanders; their wages were to be paid directly to the government which was supposed to arrange for the money to be returned to the families back in the islands by Government Agents on recruiting ships in the form of goods. Two conclusions can be drawn: the Islanders suffered from high mortality rates (by far the highest for any immigrant group in Australia) and the Queensland government keep a large part of their wages (ninety per cent).

Government records show that around 15,000 of these Islander labourers died in Queensland between 1868 and 1906: 6,579 died before 1885 and 8,771 onwards from 1885. This is a reprehensible 24 per cent of the total number of contracts and an even higher proportion of the individuals involved (around 30 per cent). Only 15.6 per cent of the wages of deceased Islanders were deducted from the Pacific Islanders' Fund to purchase goods for relatives, a profit to the government in excess of £35,000. The money was used to subsidise the administration of the Queensland labour trade. The government also held return passage money for the Islanders. The passage money for deceased Islanders was not returned to employers and became profit for the Queensland government, around £85,000, which was also used to subsidise the administration of the Queensland labour trade. In the 1900s the Fund was passed to the Commonwealth government for use to fund the deportation of the Islanders.

The present-day value of the wages retained, taking into account inflation and compound interest, is difficult to calculate as it is a rolling amount between 1885 and 1906. As a rough guide, every one thousand pounds in the 1900s is now worth one million dollars. If we use the last known balance of the deceased Islanders' account (£39,363) as our base figure, the 2012 equivalent is \$38,221,511. If

we use the £35,000 profit made on the wages, the amount in today's values is also in excess of thirty million dollars.

There is evidence that the Queensland government seldom if ever fully compensated the families of the deceased Islanders and profited largely from their deaths. At best the process was immoral and lacking fiduciary duty. In today's money, millions of dollars were misappropriated, in similar fashion to wages misappropriated by the same government from Aborigines. In August 2013 while Queensland is marking the 150th anniversary of the arrival of the first Pacific Islander labourers, it is timely to raise the issue of the Pacific Islanders' Fund.

Direct compensation to the families of descendants of the Islanders whose wages were misappropriated may now be almost impossible, but acknowledgement that this travesty occurred is a necessary part of healing for the Australian South Sea Islander community. The most sensible outcome would be for the Queensland and Australian Governments to establish a new trust fund to assist in education for the Australian South Sea Islander community, as well as for education in Vanuatu and Solomon Islands, and to assist the Australian descendants to re-link with their families back in the islands.

Prepared by Professor Clive Moore, University of Queensland: c.moore@uq.edu.au; 0419676123

Sincerely,



Emelda Davis – President

Australian South Sea Islanders (Port Jackson) Limited

PO Box 117 Pyrmont Sydney NSW 2009 Email: assi.pj@gmail.com Mobile: 0416300946

<http://www.facebook.com/groups/assipj/?fref=ts>