

## Class action launched against West Australian Government over Indigenous stolen wages

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It wasn't until Lester Coyne had children of his own that his mother, Jessie, told him about her painful past.

*Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander readers are advised that the following story contains images of people who have died.*

The 73-year-old who grew up just outside of Albury knew very little about her life growing up until he started asking questions — tough questions.

"She would get quite upset with us," he said. "But we wanted to know"

Eventually, the reason for her emotional reaction was revealed: Jessie, who died in 2000, was kidnapped from her family at the age of nine.

### Key points:

- Until the 1970s, wages earned by Indigenous workers in WA were paid to the State Government
- Historians say governments at the time knew the practice was a form of slavery
- Lawyers estimate tens of thousands of people could be eligible to join a class action launched against the WA Government to retrieve lost earnings and compensation



Lester Coyne's mother was just one of tens of thousands of Indigenous workers who received little or no wages for their work. (ABC News: Tom Edwards)

"Her parents knew nothing of where she got to," he said.

"No one knew where she went. She was just plucked off the face the earth."

Her captors put her to work in 1927 on poultry and citrus farms on the outskirts of Perth.

She received no wages in hand — it was all held in government-controlled trust accounts that she never gained access to.

"She was paid a wage that someone banked for her, which has never been recovered in any way, shape or form, but also to be working at nine-years-old and [not] being paid is [a] form of slavery,"

Lester's mother was just one of [tens of thousands of Indigenous workers](#) whose wages were sent to governments across Australia.

Now, a class action has been launched against the West Australian government in the hope of claiming compensation and lost earnings for the decades of unpaid labour forced upon Indigenous people.

More than a thousand people have registered for the claim, which will be lodged in the Federal Court today.

But according to lawyers working on the case, up to ten thousand workers and their descendants would be eligible.

Jan Saddler, head of class actions at Shine Lawyers, described the case as "historic" with lawyers combing cities and towns across WA to locate workers and their descendants.

Ms Saddler declined to comment on the amount they were seeking in compensation.

But, she said, for some claimants it was a race against the clock.

"These people have effectively been waiting all their lives to be properly compensated," she said.

"[They are] now in their 70s and 80s and even older in some cases. So, we're talking about people who are in the latter part of their lives, in their twilight years."

## **Stolen wages under 'protection acts'**

Up until the late 1970s, all Indigenous Australians were governed under various protection acts which controlled every aspect of their lives — from whether they could buy a new pair of shoes to whether they could marry.

It was these acts that allowed Aboriginal people's wages to be held in trust by state and territory governments.



Children were sent to live and work on stations including Moola Bulla in WA's Kimberley.  
(Courtesy Of The State Library Of Western Australia)

There are estimates that as much as \$500 million worth of entitlements were kept from Indigenous workers in Queensland alone, between 1920 and 1970.

[Last year, the Queensland Government settled a class action relating to these unpaid entitlements for \\$190 million dollars.](#)

A 2006 parliamentary inquiry tried to determine how much money may have been stolen from Indigenous workers nationwide, but found the practice was so extensive it would be almost impossible to determine.

In a statement to the ABC, a spokesperson for the WA Aboriginal Affairs Minister Ben Wyatt said it was working to ensure a "satisfactory outcome" and was considering the grounds of compensation lodged by the lawyers involved.

The spokesperson said that included sourcing the required materials in order to respond.

"The [WA] Government will look to achieve a mediated outcome of any claims made in respect to the stolen wages issues, with an acknowledgment of the impact that historical government policies related to income control have had on Aboriginal people and their families over many years."

One of those hoping to live long enough to see justice is Frances Wernblom.



Frances Wernblom, 76, was taken from her home and brought to Wandering Mission in the late 1940s. (ABC News: Hugh Sando)

The 76-year-old was taken from her home in the state's Great Southern region and [brought to Wandering Mission in the late 1940s](#).

While she said the mission offered stability and camaraderie with the other children, Frances was also abused and put to work as a young girl both on the mission and neighbouring households.

"It was just pennies," she said.

"I don't remember much money at all, just pennies in hands in those days.

Ms Wernblom said her biggest regret was not being able to pass on the life she would have liked to her children and grandchildren.

"We had a hard life. I didn't have the education that I would have liked. All I knew was domestic work ... we struggled."

She said any compensation has come too late for many — including her sister and parents.

"My sister just got toiletries and soap, no money in hand ... It might just be the lucky ones that will see it.

"A lot of the old ones have passed on. They won't see justice."