



# Cummeragunja Walk-Off

Secondary History activity

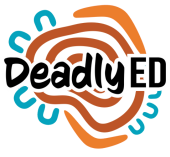
4 February, 1939



Students at Cummeragunja School

The Cummeragunja Walk-Off holds great significance for First Nations people. The Walk-Off, which was one of the first mass protests held by First Nations people in Australia, took place on February 4, 1939. On this day, approximately 200 people walked off Cummeragunja Station in southern New South Wales in protest of the poor living conditions and mistreatment of First Nations peoples by mission manager, Arthur McQuiggan.

Up until 1917, Cummeragunja Station, which sat upon the lands of the Yorta Yorta and Bangerang peoples, produced mostly wheat and wool, allowing the residents of the area to have some degree of self-sufficiency and independence. However, by 1939, the local government and Aborigines Protection Board with the backing of McQuiggan, exercised firm control over the residents of Cummeragunja by withholding the wages of workers, forcibly removing children from their families, and restricting the movements of people from the Station. In addition to this, food rations were short, homes were overcrowded, and poor sanitation led to the deaths of many people. Despite petitions to the government for improvements, the concerns of the residents fell upon deaf ears. Fed up with their circumstances, the people of Cummeragunja called on Aboriginal activist and former Cummera resident Jack Patton, to help them advocate for change.



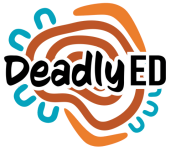
Patton, who had helped organised the 1938 Day of Mourning, spoke to the people of Cummeragunja about their rights, the government's intentions to continue to enact control and forcibly remove children. Jack's speech inspired hundreds of people to rally together, permanently leave the mission and cross the Murray River into northern Victoria to resettle. Such a movement – to leave one state and enter another – was in violation of the rules set by the Aborigines Protection Board and therefore a huge risk to the protesters. A strike camp was established on the riverbank at Barmah, which remained for nine months until mission manager McQuiggan was removed. Patten was gaoled for inspiring the walk-off but has since been recognised for his contributions and sacrifices to the people of Cummeragunja. Following the Walk-Off, many settled in Barmah, Echuca, Mooroopna or Shepparton, with some returning home to Cummeragunja.

Despite being largely unheard of, the Cummeragunja Walk-Off represents how the social and political landscape of the twentieth century began to shift and change. The protest continued to inspire the grassroots movement that fought for change in the rights and freedoms of First Nations peoples that saw the right to vote, citizenship of First Nations peoples, and the beginning of autonomy that had been long withheld. The Cummeragunja Walk-Off has since remained as a defining moment in First Nations activism and Australian history.

### **Learning Activities –**

#### **Yarning about Cummeragunja:**

- What did you know about the Cummeragunja Walk-Off before reading this article?
- The Walk-Off is an example of a peaceful protest. What are other ways people have protested peacefully throughout history?
- What is a grassroots movement?
- What elements of the protest do we see mirrored in the protests of today?
- Highlight the terms and concepts that are new to you. As a class, find out what the terms and concepts mean.



**Discussing Country:**

1. Using the AIATSIS Map of Indigenous Australia find the Country names for the places mentioned throughout the article. For example, the Country which the Cummeragunja Station sat upon.

**Writing the past:**

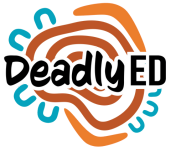
1. Write a newspaper article that explains the significance of the Cummeragunja Walk-Off and why more Australians should know its history.

**Creating awareness:**

1. Create an informative social media post of up to 10 images for Instagram that will teach people about the significance of the Cummeragunja Walk-Off. Be sure to include information about key figures involved in the protest such as Jack Patten.

**Expanding your learning:**

1. Research the prosperity and decline of Coranderrk Aboriginal Reserve.



**Teacher notes:**

- To further expand this perspective in your teaching and learning program view First Australians Episode 6: A Fair Deal for a Dark Race.
- More information about the environmental significance of the Cummeragunja area can be found [here](#). Further primary historical source materials can be found [here](#).

**Australian Curriculum links:**

- the causes and effects of European contact and extension of settlement, including their impact on the First Nations Peoples of Australia (AC9HH9K03)
- the causes of First Nations Australians' campaigns for rights and freedoms before 1965, such as discriminatory legislation and policies, the 1938 Day of Mourning and the Stolen Generations (AC9HH10K09)
- the contributions of significant individuals and groups in the campaign for the recognition of the rights of First Nations Australians and the extent to which they brought change to Australian society (AC9HH10K10)
- the significant events and methods in the movement for the civil rights of First Nations Australians and the extent to which they contributed to change (AC9HH10K11)