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Aboriginal workers cash in on mining boom

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UNTIL a few weeks ago, Patrick Willock was driving delivery trucks around Port Hedland in far north Western Australia.

Now he is one of a growing number of indigenous Australians seeking to join the resources boom and double his pay.

Mr Willock, 32, who has a two-year-old son, has been taken on as a trainee at indigenous earthmoving contractor Ngarda Civil and Mining, which works for mining giants such as BHP Billiton, Rio Tinto and Newcrest.

"A lot of my mates were doing it and they got me into it," Mr Willock said at Ngarda's depot in South Hedland, the more populous but poorer suburb inland from Port Hedland. "I'm learning the different machinery, and it keeps you busy."

The mining boom of the 1960s largely bypassed the Aboriginal population of the Pilbara because the indigenous stockmen and port labourers lacked the necessary skills. This time around, with the region experiencing a China-led commodity boom, there is new determination for Aborigines to get on board.

Indigenous contracting businesses are sprouting up and offering services to the big mining companies as they battle labour shortages.

But the barriers to entry for people characterised by lack of skills and poor literacy rates are high, and the cost of living in boom towns such as Port Hedland is soaring, making it harder for indigenous workers to break into the sector.

The Port Hedland-South Hedland area has an indigenous population of about 3400, of whom 900 are unemployed at a time when businesses from sandwich shops to mining conglomerates are screaming for staff.

"We are trying to address that by creating employment, but the entry barriers into mining aren't as easy as people think," said Barry Taylor, a director of Ngarda, which was started in partnership with contractors Henry Walker Eltin in 2001.

It is the biggest indigenous employer in Port Hedland and is set to add to its client list the Indian-owned miner Birla, for which it will look after the storage in Port Hedland of copper concentrate destined for overseas from the Nifty mine.

Having started with whipper-snippers and lawnmowers, the enterprise is now riding the mining boom, with more than \$50 million in contracts and a fleet of trucks and graders. It employs almost 170 people, 85per cent indigenous.

"It's pretty good timing by us," Mr Taylor said. "The mining companies anticipate during the next four, five years mining in the region is going to go through the roof."

Mr Taylor has a long history in the Pilbara. He is the son of Peter Coppin, one of the leaders of the successful 1946-49 Aboriginal stockmen's strike, the first strike by Aboriginal workers.

A commercial enterprise in its own right, Ngarda also provides entry-level positions for indigenous workers so they can acquire the core skills to get a job with a mining or

contracting company. BHP is trying to raise its indigenous workforce in the region to 12 per cent from 7 per cent.

"Trying to get an Aboriginal person on to a mine is onerous," Mr Taylor said.

"You have to pass courses and have certificates, given safety is a big issue. But a lot of our people are semi-literate, and if you can't read signs and you have an ore loader coming the other way you're in trouble.

"And there is no accomodation up here. If you do get accomodation, you're paying an astronomical rent."

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