

‘The Active Chorus’: The Mass Strike of 1917 in Eastern Australia

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I, Robert Bollard, declare that the PhD thesis entitled “The Active Chorus”: The Mass Strike of 1917 in Eastern Australia, is no more than 100,000 words in length including quotes and exclusive of tables, figures, appendices, bibliography, references and footnotes. This thesis contains no material that has been submitted previously, in whole or in part, for the award of any other academic degree or diploma. Except where otherwise indicated, this thesis is my own work.

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Abstract

This thesis is a study of the Great Strike of 1917, arguably the biggest class conflict in Australian history. For over two months up to 100,000 workers confronted an enraged and belligerent combination of conservative state and federal governments, employers, the establishment press and a middle class which was organised against them on an unprecedented scale.

The thesis assesses the strike from a 'history from below' perspective. In doing so, it challenges the existing historiographic consensus that the strike was doomed to defeat and that the consequences of that defeat were wholly negative. It argues that the leadership of the strike was primarily responsible for defeat and that the failure of leadership was a product of a conservatism inherent in the trade union bureaucracy. This conservatism was, moreover, underlined by the prevailing faith, predominant within official circles of the Australian labour movement at this time, in arbitration as an alternative to industrial confrontation.

It analyses the connection between the defeat in 1917 and the revival of the movement in 1919, concluding that anger at the betrayal of the 1917 strike by its official leadership played a significant role in shifting the movement to the left, motivating key sectors of the working class to seek revenge in 1919.

Synopsis

The New South Wales General Strike as it is commonly, but misleadingly, referred to (it was neither general nor confined to NSW), was clearly an event of great historic significance. The appellation of 'The Great Strike', applied by contemporaries, underscores its profound impact on a society transformed by the carnage of World War One and convulsed by political tumult on the home front.

Australian labour historiography is only beginning to break from the institutional focus that characterised labour history in the Anglo-Saxon world before the movement of 'history from below' redirected the attention of historians to the men and women who actually compose the working class.

Chapter One explores the impact of this incomplete revolution on the historiography of the Great Strike in particular, and of the labour movement during World War One in general. Symptomatic of that impact is a failure to appreciate the significance of differences between the rank and file and bureaucracy of the labour movement. Too often the Australian labour movement has been understood by historians as an undifferentiated whole, or to be more precise, as a movement divided between political and industrial wings. Political divisions, particularly between reformists and revolutionaries have also been recognized and analysed in detail. These horizontal divisions have been understood, but vertical divisions have been ignored.

The distinction between rank and file and bureaucracy within trade unions is, of course, a controversial one and Chapter One surveys some of the historical literature surrounding this question – particularly the 'rank and filist' debate. It is not simply that this debate, which involved a critique of the 'history from below' approach around this very question, impinges on the thesis. Chapter One also speculates on the manner in which a study of the Great Strike may contribute to the debate.

Before undertaking a narrative analysis of the strike, it is necessary to place it within its historical context. **Chapter Two** attempts this by addressing the question of the strike's causes – one which has also been the subject of controversy. It assesses, in particular, the

validity of Taksa's linkage of the introduction of the Card System (the strike's trigger) with Taylorism, whilst seeking to resituate this analysis within a broader understanding of the wartime radicalisation and the strike wave that had been building since 1916. This chapter also investigates the financial situation of the NSW Railways and assesses the possibility that the strike was triggered by a deliberate provocation by the State Government.

Chapters Three and Four form the narrative core of the thesis. The narrative is deliberately divided into two parts: Chapter Three charts the rise of the strike and Chapter Four its decline, the dividing point being the decision made to end the strike on the railways on 9 September 1917. Although this is a logical delineation, there are more fundamental reasons for structuring the narrative in this way. The most compelling impression arising from any close analysis of the strike is of the contrast between rank and file enthusiasm and official timidity. Before 9 September, the rank and file prevailed; after 9 September it was fighting a losing battle against what large numbers bitterly regarded as a 'sellout', and what was, for many workers, a strike turned into a lockout. This is not to suggest that there were no weaknesses in the strike movement before 9 September, but they were much less evident. These early weaknesses are dealt with in Chapter Four. Thence, the delineation of the narrative is not purely chronological. Nevertheless, a discussion of the strike's weaknesses and eventual defeat is inevitably dominated by events after 9 September. The extent to which such a discussion is shaped by subsequent events justifies that date as the delineating marker.

Chapter Five, extending from the analysis of the strike's official leadership, involves a discussion of the role played by those officials in the strike. It attempts to analyse the failure of their leadership by placing their behaviour in the context of their class location and of the historical development of trade unionism in Australia. It involves a discussion of arbitration (itself an area of controversy amongst Australian Labour Historians), locating it within a traditional Classical Marxist analysis of the trade union bureaucracy. It makes use of the evidence provided by the research embodied in the narrative chapters to enrich this discussion. In doing so Chapter Five will attempt to use the empirical

material provided by research into the Great Strike to contribute to the 'rank and filist' debate.

Chapters Six and Seven deal with two questions of fundamental importance to any assessment of the Great Strike. **Chapter Six** addresses the central strategic questions facing the strike movement. It deals therefore with the assertion, first made by Vere Gordon Childe, that the strike's defeat was inevitable primarily due to the large stocks of coal available to the NSW Government. It also deals with the problem of mass scabbing and addresses the problems of dealing with such an extensive mobilisation by the Government and by the middle and ruling classes. This is important, as the notion that the strike was doomed to defeat has been central to constraining criticism of its reluctant official leadership.

Chapter Seven explores the connection between the defeat of the Great Strike and the dramatic revival of a significant section of the movement in 1919. It attempts to answer the question, posed in Chapter One, why such an apparently disastrous defeat was followed, within a little over twelve months, by the biggest strike wave in Australia's history. This would appear to be surprising: NSW was, at the time, the principal battlefield of the class struggle in Australia, and the defeat of the strike involved the best organised and most militant groups of workers in the country. This is again important, as the 1919 strike wave suggests that 1917 was a defeat from which lessons were quickly learned for future struggle.

The **Conclusion** revisits the aims of the thesis as set out in Chapter One and outlines, in the light of the research material and arguments set out in the preceding chapters, the extent to which the thesis has met those aims and what conclusions have been drawn.

Chapter One: The Active Chorus

The strike movement that gripped the Eastern states of Australia in the latter months of 1917 has received little attention by historians in general, and labour historians in particular. Nearly 100,000 workers struck for periods varying between a few days and nearly three months. For around five weeks the core of the organised working class in NSW, and a number of strategically important groups in Victoria, were out. The strike was accompanied by scenes of enthusiastic and energetic protest. There were several demonstrations in Sydney involving tens of thousands of strikers and their supporters, at times even exceeding 100,000 in number. In Melbourne a crowd, estimated by the *Argus* to number around 20,000, attempted to march on the Federal Parliament. The aftermath of the strike was bitter defeat – a defeat that, most likely, helped embolden the Prime Minister, William Morris Hughes, to introduce a second conscription referendum. Yet it was also a defeat that contributed to a shift to the left within sections of the trade union movement, as within the following year the NSW Labor Council fell into the hands of a group of radical officials known as the ‘Trades Hall Reds’ and the Seamen’s Union was transformed from a bastion of conservatism into a militant force under the new leadership of the proto-communist, Tom Walsh.¹ Indeed, the strike was, arguably, the decisive element in that shift. The relationship between this consequence of 1917 and the great wave of offensive, and largely successful, strikes that occurred in 1919 merits investigation. With the partial exception of an unpublished PhD thesis, produced in 1965, such an investigation has not occurred, at least not in a full or systematic manner.² It is a central concern of this thesis.

It is all the more surprising, then, that the strike has received so little attention. The most substantial narrative of its course is only chapter length – a chapter by Dan

¹ Stuart MacIntyre, *The Reds*, Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1998, pp. 21-5, reveals the various manoeuvres that preceded the founding of the Communist Party in 1920. Walsh was involved, though at what point his involvement began is less clear.

² Miriam Dixson, *Reformists and Revolutionaries: an interpretation of the relations between the socialists and the mass labour organisations in New South Wales 1919-27, with special reference to Sydney*, Unpublished PhD thesis, ANU, 1965.

Coward in a book of short studies of strikes written in 1973.³ Coward's theme is the repression of the strike and much of his focus is, therefore, on the government response. A similar length chapter is devoted to the strike in Ian Turner's classic study of the period.⁴ Turner's account is both more and less useful. He describes in some detail the way in which the Defence Committee (an ad hoc organisation of officials which ran the strike in NSW) negotiated secretly to end the strike as soon as possible on what turned out to be disastrous terms. He draws no particular conclusions from this, however, and his main contention regarding the strike is that it was doomed to defeat. He makes this judgement on the rather abstract and schematic basis that the circumstances did not meet the 'Leninist' 'conditions for a successful general strike'.⁵ Turner unravels the way in which the strike's defeat helped accelerate the radicalisation of a section of the labour movement, playing, for instance, a key role in the rise of the 'Trades Hall Reds' in 1918.⁶ He does not, however, reach any conclusions that link this observation with his otherwise negative assessment of the strike.

Two works by Lucy Taksa, an unpublished honours thesis, written in 1983, and a journal article, written in 1991, add an extra dimension to the analysis of the strike's genesis.⁷ She argues that the strike involved an implicit protest at the perceived breaking by the state of a form of social contract (specifically, the promise by the Railway Commissioners not to alter working conditions during wartime). Such a protest, she posits, cannot be assessed purely on the basis of either revolutionary politics or by a traditional reformist emphasis on what was gained by the action. Her thesis is a study of the popular protest which accompanied the strike; the journal article also takes up this theme, and both are focussed quite closely on the Eveleigh railway workshops (one of the locales where the strike began). Another unpublished study, Greg Patmore's PhD thesis on the history of industrial relations in the NSW government railways, also contains

³ Dan Coward, 'Crime and Punishment: The Great Strike in New South Wales, August to October 1917' in *Strikes: Studies in Twentieth Century Australian Social History*, John Iremonger, John Merritt, and Graeme Osborne (eds.), Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1973.

⁴ Ian Turner, *Industrial Labour and Politics: The Dynamics of the Labour Movement in Eastern Australia, 1900-1921*, Canberra: ANU, 1979.

⁵ *Ibid*, p.160.

⁶ *Ibid*, p.159.

⁷ Lucy Taksa, *Social Protest and the NSW General Strike of 1917*, Unpublished Honours thesis, UNSW, 1983; Lucy Taksa, "'Defence Not Defiance" Social Protest and the NSW General Strike of 1917', *Labour History*, No. 60, May 1991, pp.16-33.

useful insights, particularly with regard to the build up of industrial tension within sections of the NSW Railways before the strike, and the painstaking struggle to rebuild unionism on the railways after the defeat.⁸

Elsewhere, the strike has been dealt with cursorily, usually in a few paragraphs in general histories of the labour movement covering this period. For instance, Childe's classic *How Labour Governs*, written in 1924, contains the archetype of the sort of analysis this thesis hopes to challenge:

...the uselessness of a strike, however widespread and popular, when the forces of labour lack organisation and unitary control – was cruelly demonstrated...In the Great Strike of 1917 there was as much solidarity as in the Coal Strike. The craft unionists and the unskilled fought side by side. But there was no directing plan animating the whole, and the solidarity was misapplied.⁹

Variants on this theme have continued to be expressed as late as 1981 by Farrell: 'The strike was spontaneous, badly organised, and mostly led by the rank and file...It succeeded only in worsening the lot of its participants.'¹⁰

The emphasis in this historiographical tradition is placed firmly on the immediate consequences of the strike – its dramatic defeat. It is noteworthy that Taksa appears to be the only historian to have explicitly critiqued Childe's negative assessment of the strike.¹¹ She does so on the basis that the element of moral and social protest (alluded to above) has not been recognised due to an overly functionalist assessment based purely on whether the strike achieved its stated objectives. In fact, it would appear that Childe's conclusion that its extension was based on a 'mistaken spirit of solidarity' has been particularly influential in circumscribing further questioning.

The only other relevant secondary sources tend to be books written with a more specific focus – histories of individual unions, for instance, such as Fitzpatrick and Cahill

⁸ Gregory Patmore, *A History of Industrial Relations in the NSW Government Railways*, Unpublished PhD thesis, Sydney University, 1986.

⁹ Vere Gordon Childe, *How Labour Governs: A Study of workers' representation in Australia*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1964, p.153.

¹⁰ Frank Farrell, *International Socialism & Australian Labour: The Left in Australia*, Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 1981, p.24.

¹¹ Taksa, 'Defence Not Defiance'.

on the seamen or Buckley on the engineers.¹² Lockwood's history of the Melbourne waterfront has a chapter on the 1917 strike, though it shares with Fitzpatrick and Cahill's book the drawback of being unscholarly, inasmuch as neither has references nor bibliographies.¹³ Other works of more specific scope include histories of Broken Hill by Dale, Kennedy and Wetherall.¹⁴

A wider range of literature regarding the wartime radicalisation has impinged on the thesis. These include a biography of Vida Goldstein by Bomford, and of Percy Brookfield, the revolutionary Broken Hill parliamentarian, by Roper.¹⁵ There is also a substantial literature regarding the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) which, despite having been banned, and effectively smashed as an organisation by the time of the strike, was clearly relevant to its genesis. The IWW has been the subject of no fewer than three substantial histories by Turner, Cain and Burgmann.¹⁶ Understandably, these deal only briefly with a strike that occurred after the denouement of their subject matter. Nevertheless, Burgmann's study contains a fascinating reference to an analysis of the strike by Ted Moyle, a leading IWW activist, in his personal diaries. Moyle applauded the fact that the strikes were started by 'the workers themselves, in opposition to the union officials', but regretted that 'high salaried officials' were in charge of the strike, and that the officials appeared to be 'hanging back' and 'afraid to move'.¹⁷ Moyle's assessment provides an alternative to the historiographical consensus established by Childe. For Childe, the rank and file were a heedless and directionless force that needed

¹² Brian Fitzpatrick, & Rowan J. Cahill, *The Seamen's Union of Australia*, Melbourne: Seamen's Union of Australia, 1981; K.P. Buckley, *The Amalgamated Engineers in Australia*. Canberra: Department of Economic History, ANU, 1970.

¹³ Rupert Lockwood, *Ship to Shore: a history of Melbourne's waterfront and its union struggles*, Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 1990.

¹⁴ George Dale, *The Industrial History of Broken Hill*, Adelaide: Libraries Board of South Australia, 1976; Brian Kennedy, *Silver, Sin and Sixpenny Ale: A Social History of Broken Hill 1883-1921*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1978; Ern Wetherell, *Industrial History of the Stormy Years 1910-1921*, (Manuscript held in the Broken Hill Library).

¹⁵ J.M. Bomford, *That Dangerous and Persuasive Woman: Vida Goldstein*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1993; Gilbert Giles Roper & Wendy & Alan Scarfe (eds.), *Labor's Titan: the story of Percy Brookfield 1878-1921*, Warrnambool: Warrnambool Institute Press, 1983.

¹⁶ Ian Turner, *Sydney's Burning*, Melbourne: Heinemann, 1967; Frank Cain, *The Wobblies at war: a history of the IWW and the Great War in Australia*, Melbourne: Spectrum Publications, 1993; Verity Burgmann, *Revolutionary Industrial Unionism: the Industrial Workers of the World in Australia*, Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

¹⁷ Burgmann, *Revolutionary Industrial Unionism*, p.175.

to be more effectively channelled by a leadership – by ‘unitary control’. For Moyle, that leadership was the problem.

As we shall see, both of these contrasting assessments were made by different groups and individuals in the immediate aftermath of the strike. Indeed, the aftermath is a crucial element in any assessment of such a conflict. The crucial years of 1918 to 1919 are dealt with in a variety of sources. Much attention has been given in particular to the shift to the left within the labour movement, which was manifested most dramatically in the rise of the ‘One Big Union’ movement (OBU).¹⁸ It was a movement that represented the high tide of syndicalism in the Australian labour movement, albeit a high tide which left as its only significant residue the very unsyndicalist Australian Council of Trade Unions. Turner also charts this period in detail, paying significant attention both to the OBU and to the way in which the leftward shift in the trade union movement was reflected within the ALP.¹⁹ The culmination of this was the adoption of the ‘socialisation’ platform in 1921. Dixon’s unpublished thesis is possibly the only major study of this period to draw a distinction between the rank and file and the leadership of the labour movement – or at least to appreciate the analytical consequences of that distinction. Her thesis draws some connection between the defeat of 1917 and the renewal of the strike wave in 1919-20 and is particularly helpful in explaining the capture of leadership of the Seamen’s Union by Tom Walsh in 1918 and 1919. It also pays close attention to the peculiar phenomenon of the ‘Trades Hall Reds’, exposing the crucial distinction between their rhetorical leftism and their industrial quiescence.²⁰

D. W. Rawson (who was one of Dixon’s supervisors) took a contrasting approach to explaining the period 1916-1920. He identified the key source of the leftward shift in the movement as a ‘general discontent with capitalist society’ arising from ‘the particular discontents of many of the trade union officials with the actions of Labor Governments’.²¹ This last quote illustrates a problem with the institutional focus of much of the history of the period. Rawson was concerned with the attitudes and behaviour of trade union officials and Labor politicians. What is clearly missing from

¹⁸ See, in particular, Ian Bedford, ‘The One Big Union, 1918-1923’ in: *Sydney Studies in Politics*: 3, (eds: I. Bedford, & R. Curnow), Sydney: F.W.Cheshire, 1963.

¹⁹ Turner, *Industrial Labour and Politics*.

²⁰ Dixon, *Reformists and Revolutionaries*.

²¹ D. W. Rawson, *Labor in Vain*, Melbourne: Longmans, 1966, p.15.

this analysis is the attitude of the workers they represented. Were they also discontented with capitalism and the actions of Labor Governments? And, if they were, how did this impact upon the leadership of the movement? Unfortunately, Rawson's approach is typical of much of the relevant historiography. Writers such as Bedford, Turner and Farrell all demonstrate this institutional emphasis to varying degrees.²² Turner's book, arguably the most influential history of the period, records the various strikes and other manifestations of mass protest. He understands that there was a leftward shift amongst the rank and file as well as the officials and that the strike wave of 1916 and the first conscription referendum were central to this phenomenon. Yet little is done to integrate this with his analysis of the leftward shift in official labour. The single exception is his observation that the defeat of 1917 played a key role in the rise of the One Big Union (OBU) movement and, by implication, of the 'Trades Hall Reds' as well.²³ But this is very much an exception. The main theme of Turner's book is the conflict that Bedford also identified between the industrial and political wings of the labour movement. As a result, he devotes far more attention to the institutional manifestations of the wartime radicalisation than to its wellsprings in the turmoil of those years. This thesis seeks to rectify this.

Turner's approach is most clearly shown in his treatment of the 1919 strikes which he deals with much more briefly than, for example, the long saga of conferences, motions et al associated with the OBU, or the ALP conference in 1921 which adopted the socialisation objective. Nor are the 1919 strikes dismissed merely in terms of space. After a brief discussion of the eighteen month long Broken Hill strike which began in 1919, Turner makes the astonishing comment that the workers had 'little to show' for their efforts.²⁴ They had in fact won, amongst other things, the 35-hour week.

In the strike wave which began in 1916, in the mass demonstrations which accompanied the two conscription referendums, in the great strikes of 1919, and, of course, in the 1917 strike itself, can be heard the massed voices of what Rosa Luxemburg

²² Bedford, 'The One Big Union'; Turner, *Industrial Labour and Politics*; Farrell, *International Socialism and Australian Labour*.

²³ Turner, *Industrial Labour & Politics*, pp.159-60 'The strike called into question the traditional structure of the trade union movement, the new relations which had been established between the unions and the Labor Party, and above all the reliance on arbitration which had characterised the union movement since the turn of the century: it was the starting-point for the important changes of the next four years.'

²⁴ *Ibid*, pp.197-9.

called ‘the active chorus’.²⁵ Their story needs to be integrated into the existing institutional history of the labour movement during this tumultuous period. The great rank and file revolt of 1917 is clearly a useful place to start.

Another reason for studying the strike in this way is that it has implications for a debate that has occurred between historians in the English-speaking world. The ‘rank and filist’ debate began in the late 1980s and early 1990s and was conducted initially in the *International Review of Social History*. It was initiated by the historian Jonathan Zeitlin, who claimed to have identified a new orthodoxy in British labour historiography based upon what he considered to be an artificial division between the ‘rank and file’ and ‘bureaucracy’ of the labour movement.²⁶ The target of Zeitlin’s polemic was an entire generation of historians in both Britain and the United States, who, inspired by the example of E.P. Thompson, rejected the previous ‘institutional’ orthodoxy of the ‘Oxford school’. This new generation rejected an approach that limited labour history to the study of institutions, turning its attention instead towards the working class itself and including (following the example of E.J. Hobsbawm and others) social and economic imperatives. This new form of historiography came to be known as ‘history from below’. In his polemic against what he preferred to characterise as ‘rank and filism’, Zeitlin singled out for particular attack Hinton, Holton and Price.²⁷ He also included in his polemic Richard Hyman, whose field was industrial relations rather than history, and whose studies of contemporary workplace relations in Britain in the early 1970s had celebrated the achievements of shop floor organisation in those turbulent years.²⁸

Zeitlin acknowledged the existence of a number of distinct theoretical traditions, all of which, he argued, informed the ‘rank and filist’ orthodoxy. One tradition saw the

²⁵ Rosa Luxemburg, *The Mass Strike*, in: *Selected Political Writings*, (edited & translated by Dick Howard), New York & London: Monthly Review Press, 1971, p.270, ‘...it is high time that the mass of Social Democratic workers learn to express their capacity for judgement and action, and therefore to demonstrate their ripeness for that time of great struggles and tasks in which they, the masses, will be the active chorus, and the leaders only the “speaking parts”, the interpreters of the will of the masses.’

²⁶ Jonathan Zeitlin, “Rank and Filism” in *British Labor History: A Critique*, *International Review of Social History*, xxxiv 1989, pp. 36-47.

²⁷ James Hinton, *The First Shop Stewards’ Movement*, London: Allen & Unwin, 1973; Bob Holton, *British Syndicalism, 1900-1914: Myths and Realities*, London: Pluto Press, 1976; Richard Price, *Masters, Unions and Men: Work Control and the Rise of Labour in Building 1830-1914*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980.

²⁸ See Richard Hyman, *Marxism and the Sociology of Trade Unionism*, London: Pluto Press, 1971; Richard Hyman, *Industrial Relations: A Marxist Introduction*, London: Macmillan, 1975.

tendency towards bureaucracy within the labour movement as both inevitable and irremediable, whether its exponents were pessimistic like Michels, with his famous ‘iron law of oligarchy’, or whether, like Mills, they saw as positive the tendency of the bureaucracy to incorporate dissent within the bounds of bourgeois legality.²⁹ The targets of Zeitlin’s criticism were, however, more influenced by the classical Marxist tradition, and, in particular, by Luxemburg and Gramsci.³⁰ This is a tradition that has always upheld the possibility that the working class is capable of breaking through the barrier of reformist bureaucracy.

Zeitlin’s polemic was conclusively and effectively rebutted, particularly by Hyman.³¹ The rebuttal mainly focussed, however, on demonstrating that Zeitlin oversimplified his opponents, and that he conflated and caricatured their positions. This is particularly relevant to Zeitlin’s criticism of the validity of the terms ‘rank and file’ and ‘bureaucracy’. His arguments in this regard are reminiscent of criticisms scholars have made in the past of Marxist categories such as class, bourgeoisie and proletariat. They have in common an identification of intermediate layers such as the new middle class, or in Zeitlin’s case, shop stewards, and the peculiarly British example of the ‘Convenor’: a senior shop steward in a large enterprise who is employed by the company but engaged full-time in union work. As Hyman points out, such criticism is predicated on an overly crude and reductionist caricature of the work it is critiquing. Just as Marxist scholars have a long history of using Marxist categories of class to analyse the complexities and subtleties of the real world, so have many of the scholars Zeitlin attacked (not least Hyman himself) directed their attention to the sometimes complex gradations – the ‘gray areas’ – that lie between the ‘rank and file’ and ‘bureaucracy’ in trade unions. Indeed, analysing those ‘grey areas’ is one of the tasks of this thesis. (See, in particular, Chapter Five).

²⁹ Robert Michels, *Political Parties: A Sociological study of the oligarchical tendencies of modern democracy*, (Trans. By Eden & Ceder Paul) New York: Hearst’s International Library, 1915; C. Wright Mills, & Helen Schneider, *The new men of power, America’s labor leaders*, New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948.

³⁰ Luxemburg, *The Mass Strike*; Antonio Gramsci, *Soviets in Italy*, Nottingham: Nottingham Institute for Workers Control, 1969.

³¹ Richard Hyman, ‘The Sound of One Hand Clapping: A Comment on the “Rank and Filist” Debate’, *International Review of Social History*, xxxiv, 1989, p.321.

Hyman himself has drawn attention to the problem of defining and delineating a distinct labour bureaucracy.³² Part of his answer is to move the focus of analysis away from the development of bureaucracy as a distinct layer or caste, separated from the rank and file by virtue of its power and relative privilege. Instead he focuses on the sociological implications of the day-to-day experience of trade union officials – what the young Marx might have termed their ‘species being’. He argues that the daily experience of bargaining with management (the brokerage role of the bureaucracy made concrete) brings about a distinct view of strikes and confrontation. They grow to see them, not as the rank and file mostly do, as a reaction to the experience of exploitation, but as tools to be used to aid in negotiations. Moreover, the daily focus on building and maintaining union organisation induces ‘resistance to objectives or forms of action which naturally antagonise employers or the state and thus risk a violent confrontation’.³³ This qualification is important, whatever conclusions one draws regarding Zeitlin’s arguments. In Australia in 1917, many unions were tiny and their officials were often not salaried. A definition of ‘bureaucracy’ based on a teleological reading backwards from today’s high-salaried, technocratic officials would clearly be a mistake.

Zeitlin made another point, which, perhaps in a way he never intended, illuminates a genuine demarcation between his historiographical methodology and that of the historians he was attacking. It is a point that deserves serious attention, but was largely ignored in the debate. He criticised the fact that, with their various ‘intellectual and political preoccupations, historians of a ‘rank-and-filist’ bent were naturally attracted to the more turbulent periods of British labour history’.³⁴ The implication is that their approach has involved a distortion of reality: labour history looked at through a prism that magnifies conflict and minimises periods of relative peace.

This observation of Zeitlin’s is, in a curious way, illustrated by a contribution made by two British scholars at approximately the same time as the debate. Heery and Kelly, in a collection of sociological studies of trade unions, mounted a sustained attack

³² Richard Hyman, ‘The Politics of Workplace Trade Unionism: Recent Tendencies and Some Problems for Theory’, *Capital and Class* 8, 1979.

³³ Hyman, ‘The Politics of Workplace Trade Unionism’, p.417.

³⁴ Zeitlin, “‘Rank and Filism’ in British Labor History”, p.43.

on the very concepts of ‘rank and file’ and ‘bureaucracy’.³⁵ They buttressed their attack with empirical research conducted amongst a series of British unions in 1987. They claimed that their research discounted the existence of any significant or systematic clash between officials and shop stewards. On the contrary, they found little but mutual support in the pursuit of the routine and mundane tasks of everyday trade unionism. What is missing from Heery and Kelly’s work is any sense of historical context. The year in which they conducted their research was an historical low point for British trade unionism, pummelled as it had been by the defeat of the miners’ strike and of the print workers at Wapping. Though arguing a position similar to Zeitlin’s, Heery and Kelly were guilty of precisely the sort of distortion of which Zeitlin accused his critics – of drawing universal conclusions from an unusual and specific historical example.

This British debate has found its echo in Australia in the work of Tom Bramble. In a study of industrial relations in Australian car factories, he developed a more sophisticated version of a ‘rank and file’ position. His contribution to the debate was to argue that, whereas there is an undeniable tendency towards conservatism amongst trade union officials,

Their conservatism is...contingent upon the pressure placed on them by members, particularly during the course of struggles that have an explosive rather than an integrative logic.³⁶

Julie Kimber, in her study of job committees in the Broken Hill mines, also made an original and significant contribution to the debate. Whilst recognising the validity of the dichotomy between rank and file and officials, she saw it as only part of a more complex picture:

...the critical variable in the influence of the job committees and democratic involvement generally was the orientation of the dominant activist grouping...this orientation was determined by the way in which a number of interrelated factors intersected at particular historical junctures, namely the activists’ ideological

³⁵ E. Heery, and J. Kelly, ‘Full-time Officers and Shop Steward Network: Patterns of Cooperation and Interdependence’ in P. Fosh, and E. Heery (eds.), *Trade Unions and Their Members: Studies in Union Democracy and Organisation*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990.

³⁶ Tom Bramble, ‘Trade Union Organisation and Workplace Industrial Relations in the Vehicle Industry 1963-1991’, *Journal of Industrial Relations*, Vol. 35, No. 1, March 1993, p.42.

perspectives, their occupation and location, and their position within the union hierarchy.³⁷

Kimber herself identified her position as intermediate between the ‘rank and filists’ and their critics. It is, however, hard to see anything in her analysis that would be objectionable to any of the ‘rank and filists’ targeted by Zeitlin. Most of them, after all, were Marxists who would see the division between labour and capital rather than between rank and file and bureaucracy within the labour movement as the central contradiction at work in the class struggle. Kimber’s contribution, like Bramble’s, adds a necessary correction to overly simplistic ‘rank and filist’ formulations, but it neither denies the validity of the categories of ‘rank and file’ and ‘bureaucracy’ nor contradicts the fundamental ‘rank and filist’ thesis that the bureaucracy’s role as a broker between the two classes results in a tendency towards conservatism. She argues, correctly, that this tendency is not the only factor at work. One must also take into account the politics of the officials, the extent of democracy within each union and, as Bramble argued, the extent to which the rank and file is, or was, able to constrain or influence their behaviour. This last point, after all, is an essential element in the ‘positive’ tradition of Luxemburg and Gramsci; without it revolution would be impossible. But to suggest that the distinction between the rank and file and bureaucracy is not the only factor at work is not to deny that such a division exists or that it is important.

To understand the way in which this debate impacts on this thesis it is first necessary to appreciate the unusual nature of the Great Strike of 1917 - an event of immense historical significance. Only the maritime strikes of the 1890s bear comparison in terms of the scale of the strike activity, the viciousness with which it was repressed, and the radicalisation which both engendered and accompanied it. In fact, as Turner has cogently argued, the mass strike of 1917 was in almost all respects, a larger-scale confrontation than the strikes of the 1890s.³⁸ It was therefore, arguably, the highest point achieved in the history of the class struggle in Australia. It thus requires greater attention and more sustained analysis than historians have given it so far.

³⁷ Julie Kimber, “‘A Case of Mild Anarchy?’: Job Committees in the Broken Hill mines c1930 to c1954’ *Labour History*, Number 80, May 2001, p.44.

³⁸ Turner, *Industrial Labour and Politics*, p.141.

The scale and nature of the strike threw into sharp relief divisions between the rank and file and officials within the labour movement. In a sense this is not surprising. Only in confrontations on this scale are the fundamental questions of class rule posed. Marxist historiography is informed by the implications of history for revolutionary practice. It has, therefore, an in-built bias towards periods in which revolutionary possibilities are evident. In the context of the rank and filist debate, it is important to understand that the class location of the trade union bureaucracy – its role as a broker between labour and capital – is most likely to be evident in situations where class conflict reaches a level of intensity where brokerage is impossible. A useful reply to Zeitlin's criticism is, then, to defend the idea of focussing on the highpoints of class conflict – such as 1917 in Australia. The point in doing so is not to pretend that such conflict is normal or natural, that the proletariat is forever straining at the leash, or that trade union officials spend most of their time restraining or even betraying a militant rank and file. There is a place for social history and sociology which attempts to establish what is normally the case – to map, monitor and analyse the patterns of everyday life in times of social peace. There is also clearly a place for a historiography that focuses on moments of conflict, on war and revolutions, on strikes and civil unrest. In such great moments of conflict can sometimes be discerned aspects of society that are normally hidden from view. One such aspect is the inherent tendency towards conservatism of the trade union bureaucracy.

It is no less valid for historians to focus on such extreme and unusual historical conjunctures than it is for scientists to examine the behaviour of chemicals at unusually high temperatures or atomic particles when accelerated at extreme speeds. If a discernable 'bureaucracy' exists and if that bureaucracy is incapable of leading a struggle that goes beyond the bounds of normal trade unionism, then, only in conflict which breaks those bounds, can this incapacity can be discerned. Concentration of effort on understanding the highpoints of class conflict is, therefore, not simply a manifestation of historical thrill seeking, or an unbalanced and distorted focus on episodes in history predetermined to justify a hypothesis. It is instead the only legitimate way in which such a hypothesis can be tested.

However trivial the issue that triggered the 1917 strike, it drew inevitably a repressive response from state and federal governments that threatened the continued existence of many unions. The ‘rank and filist’ position, as we have seen, contends that there is a distinct trade union bureaucracy and that this bureaucracy acts as a broker between labour and capital. It follows from this hypothesis that the bureaucracy must fail the test of such a momentous confrontation. It certainly appears to have done so in 1917. It was a confrontation that appeared to meet all the criteria for the caricature of the ‘rank and filist’ position drafted by Zeitlin in his polemic. Here we had the rank and file ready and willing for a battle that would go beyond all the hitherto-established bounds of trade unionism, and a bureaucracy shrinking even from the sound of battle and eager to end the conflict on any terms. Thus, this conflict has the potential to illustrate clearly an argument that has yet to be made in reply to Zeitlin. That argument would contend that the highpoints of class conflict are not aberrant episodes of disorder. They do not punctuate an otherwise orderly history of industrial relations that is at once mundane and complex and that is, therefore, resistant to explanation by such ‘reductionist’ terms as ‘class’, ‘rank and file’ and ‘bureaucracy’. Instead, only in such moments is the validity of these terms fully revealed.

There is an even more obvious reason for concentrating on the high points of conflict between the classes – namely the extent to which such periods illuminate areas of society that in normal periods are hidden from view. In an essay on ‘history from below’, Eric Hobsbawm remarked upon the wealth of documents made available to historians by the French Revolution:

One of the reasons why so much modern grassroots history has emerged from the study of the French Revolution is that this great event in history combines two characteristics which rarely occur together before that date. In the first place, being a major revolution, it suddenly brought into activity and public notice enormous numbers of the sort of people who previously attracted very little attention outside their family and neighbours.³⁹

The Great Strike was not an event of anything like the scale and significance of the French Revolution. Yet it shared with that great upheaval this characteristic of bringing

³⁹ Eric Hobsbawm, *On History*, New York: The New Press, 1997, p. 206.

into public focus a large number of people who are barely visible, at best, to the historical researcher. The newspapers of the time, normally devoted almost exclusively to the doings of governors and premiers, ministers and prime ministers, were in 1917 full of the activities of wharfies, miners, coal lumpers and carters. Along with their wives and children, they filled the streets, inscribed placards and banners with their views, and forced their way into the public discourse that was, and is, normally reserved for their 'betters'. It would be peculiar indeed if historians wishing to operate 'from below' were not attracted to such a period.

Note on Sources

Approaching any historical subject with a 'history from below' approach inevitably involves a problem with sources. The great and the powerful have more access than ordinary people to the various media whereby their actions, opinions and pronouncements may be recorded for posterity. It is impossible to construct a narrative of the Great Strike without relying heavily on newspapers which were hostile to the strikers and which operated fairly openly as propaganda sheets for the government. The Labor press of the time, while more lively and substantial than it is today, nevertheless was mainly devoted to argument rather than to reportage. The minutes of the trade union bodies involved, where they survive, are often confined to mundane and routine trivia with barely a reflection of the great events in which the participants of the meetings they record must have been involved. So, for instance, the minute book of the Wonthaggi miners, who struck in defiance of the efforts by their officials to keep them at work, contains not a single mention of the strike.

It is unfortunate for this project that few, if any, of the participants in the Great Strike are still alive, as oral history would then provide an opportunity to fill in some of the gaps in the public record. Nevertheless, there are a number of recordings of interviews made, mostly in the late 1980s, on file at the National Library. Most of these are the result of a Bicentennial project in 1988 to record the memories of a selection of elderly residents of NSW. One of the interviewers was Lucy Taksa, and she made a point of asking everyone she interviewed about their memories of the Great Strike – with mixed results. Many simply remembered there being no public transport, which is at

least some counterpoint to the triumphant claims made at the time by Acting Premier Fuller regarding the success of the scabbing effort and the ‘nearly normal’ train and tram service that he alleged prevailed. The few who were more active participants provide some fascinating insights. One such, for instance, is the memory of a woman from a family of policemen who recalls her brother opening the door during the strike to a friend’s country cousin, who normally stayed with them on trips to the city. Her brother, a serving policeman, refused to allow the cousin in because his reason for visiting the city was to scab.

This girl, her cousin used to come up frequently. I knew him well. And he came up to stop at our place and my brother answered the door. He said, ‘Oh no,’ he said, ‘you’re not coming here.’ The scab, you know, to take another man’s job.⁴⁰

The interviewer, Lucy Taksa, later asked her whether other policemen felt the same way as her brother:

Lucy Taksa: And how did the other policemen feel about the strike?
Alice Doyle: Oh, well they all felt bad about it.⁴¹

How are we to deal with such a revelation? On the one hand, it is a memory of one very old woman. Quite apart from the tricks time plays with memory, there is the possibility that she may be incorrectly drawing conclusions regarding ‘all’ the police from her personal experience of the policemen in her family. Yet it is tempting to speculate on what such an attitude on the part of Sydney police would have meant if they had been called upon to deal violently with mass pickets in order to protect men whom they despised as scabs. Could they have been relied upon to ‘do their duty’ and break heads with the gusto normally expected of serving policemen? Such speculation is unsustainable. Nevertheless, having listened to this interview, it is hard not to view other evidence regarding the police without looking for signs that indicate their attitude towards the strikers and the scabs. It becomes apparent, for instance, that there is a

⁴⁰ National Library of Australia (NLA), Oral TRC 2301, NSW Bicentennial oral history collection, INT. 124, Interview with Alice Doyle.

⁴¹ Ibid.

marked contrast between the attitude of Sergeant Thompson, the officer in charge of the police escort accompanying the Victorian scabs at Pelaw Main Colliery in NSW, who referred to the local coal miners with contempt as ‘so-called strikers’⁴² and that of one of his colleagues in Victoria, Sub Inspector Madigan. Madigan filed a report of the attempt by one hundred and fifty wharfies to report for work at the S.S. *Oonah* on 25 October 1917 (at a point where the strike had effectively become a lockout). The refusal to hire them proved a trigger for a number of violent incidents, as other police reports indicate.⁴³ Yet Madigan was keen to emphasise the moderation and good behaviour of the wharfies he dealt with and finished by advising his superiors that tact and discretion should be used in dealing with the wharfies as ‘these men feel their position keenly’.⁴⁴

Both the oral history interview and the police report are limited, as most sources are. Anecdotal evidence, such as that provided by Alice Doyle, is limited by scope – like viewing a room through a keyhole. Yet such a view can be valuable. It raises possibilities rather than providing answers, yet this is surely of some use, particularly if, as the example of the police report shows, it makes the researcher alert to nuances in other evidence that might otherwise have gone unregarded.

Oral history is most notorious, of course, for its reliance on human memory. As Eric Hobsbawm observed:

But most oral history today is personal memory, which is a remarkably slippery medium for preserving facts. The point is that memory is not so much a recording as a selective mechanism, and the selection is, within limits, constantly changing. What I remember of my life as a Cambridge undergraduate is different today from what it was when I was thirty or forty-five. And unless I have worked it up into conventional form for the purpose of boring people...it is likely to be different tomorrow or next year.⁴⁵

This observation is correct, but similar biases and distortions are to be found in all documents, however contemporary they may be. It is the job of the historian to be aware

⁴² Victorian Public Records (VPRS), Chief Secretary’s Department, Inwards Correspondence, 4723/P0000/499, Report of Sergeant P. Thompson, 5 October 1917.

⁴³ VPRS, Police Department, Inwards Correspondence, 807/P/000/624, File W9850. These incidents are dealt with in detail in Chapter Four below.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, Report of Sub-Inspector Madigan, 25 October 1917.

⁴⁵ Hobsbawm, *On History*, p. 206.

of the bias and account for it when interpreting a source. This can be done too with oral history. For example, the National Library has on record interviews with five miners from Broken Hill who were all young men during the syndicalist period (they all had experience at least of the 1919 strike) and who remained active in union affairs on the Barrier.⁴⁶ Indeed, one of them was ‘Shorty’ O’Neill, who went on to head the Labor Council in Broken Hill after the Second World War. For the most part (with some qualifications and criticisms) Shorty was supportive of the militancy displayed in his youth. In particular, he was keen during the interview to defend the idea of the Labor Volunteer Army. Yet he went on, by contrast, to attack the Communist Party at some length and to denounce its largely unsuccessful attempts to build a base in Broken Hill.

The contrast between his defence of the revolutionary syndicalism of 1916-17 and his red-baiting of a later generation of militants is made more explicable by an understanding of the political trajectory of unionism on the Barrier, from militancy and left wing politics to a narrower and politically conservative economism. The career of Ern Wetherall, the revolutionary syndicalist who ended up as a leading ‘Grouper’, is instructive in this regard. In the interview, O’Neill’s attack on the Communist Party is triggered by his recollection of the fact that the Melbourne millionaire, John Wren, donated £3,000 to the miners during the 1919 strike. Apparently, the miners, for many years thereafter, began their union meetings by lifting their hats to John Wren. Wren was, of course, famously attacked by the communist author, Frank Hardy, in his novel *Power Without Glory*. This ‘slander’ is provided by O’Neill, not only as evidence of communist perfidy, but as an explanation for the failure of the Communist Party to build a base on the Barrier. Given that Hardy’s book was published in the early 1950s this is clearly useless as an explanation for that failure, however useful it may have been to Shorty O’Neill as a post-facto justification for his hatred of the ‘reds’. Precisely because we can account for O’Neill’s bias, and discount it, it is possible to extract what is useful from the interview without being misled by his attempts to justify the political positions adopted during his industrial career.

In any case, the shortcomings of union minutes and the absence of a more substantial base of oral history recordings, does not mean that the voices of rank and file

⁴⁶ NLA, Oral TRC 341, ‘Interviews with five miners’.

strikers are never to be heard. They are often quoted, albeit unreliably, in the establishment press. Genuine fragments can be discerned, filtered through the distortion of ridicule. Contradictions in the propaganda agenda of the press are often helpful here. The papers, for instance, often argued that the strikers were manipulated like sheep by trade union officials and Labor politicians – that the strike activity was, therefore, a product of smoke-filled intrigue at Trades Hall which the ordinary worker had to suffer and endure without enthusiasm. As a consequence, they were keen to quote any comment made by workers at mass meetings complaining about the absence of secret ballots. The almost Dickensian figure of the hoary but sensible old trade unionist tut-tutting at the rash behaviour of his fellows made a regular appearance in various guises. Yet the same papers published, with almost as much relish, tales of militants ignoring the advice of conservative officials, and of the energy and enthusiasm of crowds in the Domain or on the street processions. They did so with blithe disregard to the fact that the two narratives are patently contradictory. It is as if decades of sensationalist reportage of larrikinism had engrained an instinct for automatically focussing on any example of disorder or unrest; they simply could not help themselves.

In the end, there is a more fundamental point to be made, however, about the project of ‘history from below’. It is too often forgotten that E.P. Thompson was a Marxist, that his interest in and empathy for his subject was not simply sentimental. He believed that the working class was the agent of change and that an understanding of that agency was therefore the proper study for a historian. Thompson’s very popularity has perhaps been his undoing in this regard, as the adoption of the term ‘history from below’ by non-Marxist historians has diluted this element of agency. Instead it can be used to describe an approach that seeks to give voice to the voiceless simply because they have been left out of history, rather than because they have the potential to make it. Such an approach understands that history is incomplete without an understanding of the lives, the actions and motives, of the oppressed and downtrodden. It may also be infused with a genuine regard for their suffering and, at its best, a respect for their capacity to resist, which falls just short of understanding the significance and potential of that resistance. It can, as a result, be extended to a criticism of Marxist historiography for ‘ignoring’ other oppressed and marginalised groups in its focus on the working class – a criticism that

fails to understand the point of Thompson's approach. He was motivated by more than sympathy for the plight of workers in Eighteenth Century England and anger at 'the enormous condescension of history'. The working class were, he believed, the protagonists of history; their successes were the triumphs, and their failures the tragedies, not just of their class, but of the whole of human society.

This point is relevant to the problem of sources, because it places that problem in perspective. Viewing the sources with a perspective of history from below, it becomes evident that more material is available than one might have supposed. The difference in perspective is revealed more in a new approach to the evidence than the choice of sources to investigate. Again, the daily press in 1917 is instructive. The Great Strike was a major news story. In the Sydney press at the time it usually took up two or three broadsheet pages per day over two months, squeezing out both the coverage of the unfolding horror of Passchendaele and the quaintly misinformed coverage of the Russian Revolution. Any historian accessing such a source has to make choices regarding which material deserves the closest attention. A traditional approach would focus on the speeches of the Premier and the Labor opposition along with the replies made by union leaders in the Domain. It would also, probably, include a close analysis of the major headlined stories regarding which union had gone out, and other strike developments. The small anecdotes about what happened on a picket line, the occasional revealing quote from a worker at a mass meeting, the outraged report of the insolence of the young women in the railway refreshment rooms as they responded to a pompous call for loyalty by donning their hats and coats and filing out to join the strike: these are the nuggets that a historian with a focus on the base of the movement will seek out. Without such a focus they could easily be ignored. They aren't essential to the general narrative – which union went out on what date and so on – and their importance is, therefore, not immediately apparent.

Another way to understand this question of focus is to look at the questions a historian is trying to answer when engaging in research. When, for instance, Turner states incorrectly that the seamen were 'called out' on 11 August⁴⁷ (when in fact they walked off in defiance of their officials) he is doing more than making a minor mistake – something historians inevitably do. He is most likely revealing that the way in which

⁴⁷ Turner, *Industrial Labour & Politics*, p.149.

they struck, whether it was official or unofficial, was not a question of importance to his research. When a paper such as the *Sydney Morning Herald* states that a group of workers, such as the seamen, for instance, have gone on strike in opposition to their union officials, and that their union has appointed delegates to the Defence Committee, then that statement can be simply read as given and incorporated into the narrative of the strike. Viewed from a history from below perspective, however, it requires further investigation. Did the workers take their defiance of their leadership to the extent of selecting their own representatives? Or did the officials who opposed the strike take their place on the committee that was supposed to direct it? The implications are obvious, but the significance is unlikely to be apparent unless one approaches the evidence with a view of the importance of the distinction between the rank and file and the trade union bureaucracy.

Thesis Aims

This thesis has a number of aims. It attempts to contribute empirically and theoretically to the 'rank and filist' debate which has engaged the attention of many scholars in the field of labour history over the past decade and a half. A central contention of 'rank and filist' historians is that there is a fundamental division between the rank and file and the bureaucracy within the labour movement. They argue that the role of the bureaucracy as a broker between capital and labour makes the bureaucracy innately hostile to any confrontation that in any way threatens the existence of capital. The thesis will use the evidence from the strike of 1917 to reassess this contention.

It also aims to test and develop a hypothesis that the traditional historiography of the strike is incorrect in its dismissal of the strike, its belittling of the positive elements involved in a rank and file revolt on such a scale, and in its failure to address the medium term consequences of the strike, particularly its connection with the strike wave of 1919.

Essential to the process of reassessing the strike will be a 'history from below' approach to the strike itself, to the industrial unrest and accompanying political radicalisation which preceded it, and to the strike's aftermath up to and including 1919. This will attempt to address an overly institutional approach to be found in much of the labour historiography of the period. This, in turn, establishes how and why such a

momentous strike developed out of an apparently trivial dispute in one workplace in Sydney. Thus, this thesis seeks to locate the strike within the broader context of the wartime radicalisation.

This project has the advantage of entering into territory that is, if not actually unknown, relatively little travelled. The straightforward task of constructing a detailed narrative of the dispute provides a skeletal structure around which the research project has been built. The testing of the hypothesis is interwoven within such a narrative. Arguably, why the rank and file went on strike can to a significant degree be surmised from how they did so.

Chapter Two: The Causes of the Strike

Many doctors hold the view that there is an emotional wave unconsciously produced by the fact that we are at war that has disturbed the mental equilibrium of a great many of us...that causes us not to see clearly, thoroughly and exhaustively, but rather to take notice of petty worries and troubles as is they are inflicted deliberately¹

Chief Commissioner Fraser, NSW Railways, 1916

There have been two, largely unrelated, debates regarding the origins of the Great Strike. One of these debates occurred recently within the ranks of labour historians and was initiated by Lucy Taksa. In a series of papers, most prominently in the journal, *Labour History*, she challenged the way in which historians have been, in her opinion, too dismissive of the concerns of the workers involved. Her greatest concern was with the statement by Ian Turner that the introduction of the card system into the railway and tramway workshops at Randwick and Eveleigh, the event which triggered the Great Strike, was 'not particularly important'.² Turner saw the strike as simply a manifestation of the wartime radicalisation of labour, believing that both sides were spoiling for a fight and that the introduction of the card system was merely an excuse to begin the inevitable conflict. In contrast to this, Taksa was concerned to restore the importance of the card system. She did so, partly, by arguing that the card system was a serious attempt to introduce Taylorism (the new American system of 'scientific' management based on time and motion studies) into the biggest workplace in Australia. Her argument that the card system was a form of Taylorism, in contrast to the historiographic tradition expressed by Turner, reasserted the dominant understanding of the dispute within the labour movement at the time.³

¹ Mitchell Library, Rail Department Pamphlet, *Address by Mr. Fraser to employees at Eveleigh, 23 November 1916*, Rail Printing Office, pp. 2-3.

² Turner, *Industrial Labour and Politics*, p. 141.

³ Taksa, "'Defence Not Defiance'"; Lucy Taksa, *'All a Matter of Timing': Workplace Restructuring and Cultural Change in the NSW Railways and Tramways Prior to 1921*, Sydney: School of Industrial Relations and Organisational Behaviour, UNSW, Working Paper Series, 1996; Lucy Taksa, *Social Capital, Community and Citizenship at the Eveleigh Railway Workshops in Sydney, 1880-1932*, Sydney: School of Industrial Relations and Organisational Behaviour, UNSW, Working Paper Series, 1996. See also Lucy Taksa, *All a Matter of Timing: the Dissemination of Scientific Management in NSW*, Unpublished PhD thesis, UNSW, 1994.

A useful consequence of re-establishing the connection with Taylorism, though one not fully explored by Taksa, is that it locates the specific dispute over the card system within the context of a global phenomenon. The First World War was a voracious consumer of metal and metal products. The engineering industries of cities such as Glasgow, Berlin, Petrograd, Turin and Barcelona, grew at an explosive pace.⁴ It was impossible both to supply enough skilled labour to meet the wartime demand and to adhere to the rigid demarcations traditionally associated with engineering. The result, in Britain in particular, was a struggle over ‘dilution’, the employment of unskilled or semi-skilled labour in place of skilled engineers, with an accompanying re-ordering of the production process to make this possible.⁵ The new ‘American’ notion of scientific management, associated most commonly with ‘Taylorism’, was one of the possible solutions to this crisis in the labour market. Along with the contemporaneous extension of assembly line production associated with the Ford Motor Company, it provided a means by which complex operations could be broken up into simple and easily regulated activities and allowed skilled workers to be replaced by the unskilled.

This explains why Taylorism was in vogue in 1917, yet is not sufficient to explain the enthusiasm of the NSW Railways’ Chief Commissioner Fraser for the new American methods. The NSW Railways, despite some increased traffic associated with the war, was not suffering from a shortage of labour. In fact, the service had actually contracted its labour force slightly as advantage was taken of the enlistment by some of its employees to increase productivity; they were simply not replaced. Nor was the card system introduced to ‘dilute’ the skilled labour in the workshops. In short, the global explosion in metal production helps explain the general popularity of Taylorism at this time, but more is needed to explain its introduction into the NSW Railways.

During the strike itself, there was a different debate about its causes – between two competing conspiracy theories. For the government and its supporters in the establishment press, the strike was a conspiracy in which the sinister hand of the IWW

⁴ Donny Gluckstein, *The Western Soviets: Workers’ Councils Versus Parliament 1915-1920*, London: Bookmarks, 1985, contains an excellent detailed comparison of the wartime expansion of engineering in all these cities and a discussion of the connection between this underlying economic development and the revolutionary upsurge at the war’s end.

⁵ James Hinton, *The First Shop Stewards’ Movement*, London: G. Allen & Unwin, London, 1973, contains the best narrative of the struggle over ‘dilution’ in the British engineering industry during the First World War.

could be seen. They made much of alleged statements by the newly elected Labor M.L.A. for Surrey Hills, A. W. Buckley. Buckley, who had the added bonus for conservative propagandists of once having been a ‘Wobbly’, was accused of declaring that the strike was now a political one that could bring down the Nationalist government.⁶ There was also a ‘sensation’ when the *Sydney Morning Herald* claimed to have uncovered a plot to foment the strike by the Trades Hall that dated back several months.⁷ On the union side, the element of conspiracy was understood to lie in a deliberate decision by the State Government, with the blessing (presumably) of Hughes, to provoke a strike in order to teach the labour movement a lesson and to revenge the defeat of the Conscription Referendum and the victory of the coal miners, both of which had occurred in late 1916.

However, neither of these contemporary theories is sufficient to explain the dispute. The idea that it was a conspiracy by the Trades and Labour Council or the IWW is laughable propaganda. The same papers that argued this line carried innumerable examples in the minutiae of their strike reportage of how the strike was spread by rank and file activity and of the reluctance of most officials to prosecute it. The idea that it was a state conspiracy is much more plausible. It is inherently plausible in that the conflict began with a clear provocation – the introduction of the card system – and a provocation, moreover, that was made within the public sector, with the involvement by the NSW (Holman/Fuller) Government (at least). It is also plausible because of the rapidity with which the state mobilised, particularly with regard to recruiting and directing the ‘volunteer’ effort. A tantalising glimpse into the mind of the Prime Minister, Billy Hughes, at the beginning of the strike is provided by the transcript of a meeting he had with a delegation of employers from Broken Hill. Hughes asked one of the employers what the position was at Port Pirie and how long they could survive in the event of the wharf labourers there refusing to unload coal. The meeting took place on 6 August – only four days after the initial walk out at Randwick and Eveleigh, and before either the wharfies or the miners in NSW joined the strike.⁸ That Hughes was anticipating trouble with the delivery of coal to Port Pirie, specifically with strike action

⁶ *Daily Telegraph*, 8 August 1917, p.7 & 10 August 1917, p.5. Buckley denied having said any such thing.

⁷ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 28 August 1917, p.6.

⁸ NLA, W.M.Hughes Papers, MS1538, Series 18, ‘Smelting at Broken Hill: Deputation to Prime Minister, 6 August 1917.

by wharfies in South Australia, at the very least indicates that he was aware of the likelihood of a more general stoppage. It is not proof of a desire on his part to engineer such a strike, though it invites speculation in that direction.

A state conspiracy cannot be ruled out. However, for it to be considered more than a possibility there would need to be either direct evidence of its existence or, at least, the absence of an alternative motive for the provocation. As it is, such an alternative clearly exists. The NSW railways may not have been suffering from a labour shortage in 1917, but they were in crisis. The combined railway and tramway system, which had returned a modest profit before the war, was, by 1917, running a deficit of £412,253.⁹

At the time, there was some argument that this was due to increased labour costs. Some historians have echoed this argument, noting, for instance, that there were substantial increases in award payments for a range of railway workers in the years leading up to 1917.¹⁰ This in itself is not evidence, however, of increased labour costs. The war was an inflationary period. Substantial wage increases may not have represented real wage increases. In any case we have the evidence from Commissioner Fraser himself that this was not the case. In late August 1917, as the strike remained deadlocked, Fraser addressed an audience of his striking employees at the Railway Institute. The meeting was a peculiarly cordial affair given the circumstances, but it nevertheless included a number of barbed questions from the floor. One questioner asked the Commissioner whether the crisis in the service was due to the new system of surveillance increasing the number of foremen and thereby adding to the overall wages bill. Fraser answered by pointing out that the war had seen a substantial increase in productivity. The railways were carrying a much larger volume of traffic with a slightly reduced labour force.¹¹ The cost of moving passengers and freight had actually been reduced. Much of

⁹ NSW State Archives (NSA), 12/12633.5, NSW Government Railway & Tramway Commissioners, *Report of the Commissioners for the Year Ended 30 June 1917*, p.1.

¹⁰ Taksa, *Social Capital Community and Citizenship*, p.22, for instance, ascribes the crisis on the railways as due to a combination of higher wages granted by the NSW industrial court in 1915 and the free movement of troops; Turner, *Industrial Labour and Politics*, p.141, states that the crisis was due to a variety of factors including 'mounting interest bills, and higher wages.' But he contradicts this in a footnote where he notes that: 'Wages had not, however, risen commensurably with living costs.'

¹¹ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 August 1917, p.7, relates the question and Fraser's answer: 'A voice: Did it ever strike you that a great deal of the increased cost of transport is attributable to the white cuffs and collars in the railways? Mr. Fraser: No, because the exact converse is the case. I have told you that in the

this can be explained by the reduction in the wages staff of the department. At 30 June 1917, 5,890 railway and tramway staff were serving at the front (another 647 were dead or missing).¹² Figures provided to the press by one of the unions during the strike (regarding the numbers of their members on strike) confirm the impact of their absence.¹³ This must have represented a significant saving in wages, as they were not all replaced.¹⁴ It may even have been sufficient to discount for a rise in real wages, if such a rise had occurred, thereby accounting for the decrease in labour costs claimed by Commissioner Fraser.

Why then was there a financial crisis on the railways? One reason was the fact that some of the new traffic, specifically traffic carried for the Federal Government as a result of the war effort (the most obvious example being troop movements) was being carried gratis or at a discount.¹⁵ Part of the debt of the railways was, therefore, simply its share of the general governmental war debt. A more significant problem was, however, a rise in interest rates. The railways had been built, relatively recently, with borrowed capital. Indeed, some construction was still being carried out. The accumulated war debt of the various combatant countries had led to a sharp rise of interest rates throughout the world. In the year ending 30 June 1914 the NSW railways and tramways would have made (without factoring in interest rates) a profit of £2,332,421. After paying annual interest charges of £2,123,054 they still managed to turn a modest profit of £209,367.¹⁶ In the year ending 30 June 1917, the interest payments had climbed to £2,858,789 – an increase of £735,735. A working profit of £2,464,725 was thereby reduced to a deficit of

year 1913-14 it cost us in wages to transport traffic £1,019,000 and in 1917 £996,000, or £25,000 less to transport business which aggregated 37,000,000 tons more than in 1914.'

¹² NSA, 12/12633.5, NSW Government Railway & Tramway Commissioners, *Report of the Commissioners for the Year Ended 30 June 1918*, p.25.

¹³ *Sun*, 9 August 1917, p.5, quotes the general secretary of the Coachmakers' Union: 'Our membership is 2000, and approximately 1500 work for the Railway Commissioners. Over 200 of our coachmakers from the railway and tramway are at the front, leaving 1300, of whom only 14 have refused to cease work and join in the dispute.'

¹⁴ Australian National University (ANU), Noel Butlin Archives (NBA), E80/51/4, *Royal Commission into the Job and Time Card System*, 1918, p.3, quotes Commissioner Fraser: 'we have by enlistment for service abroad lost of our original staff some 5,000 to 6,000 men...Many of them were not replaced – the work was done effectively by improved methods.'

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 1918, p.6, notes a further wartime cost – the decision of the Railway Commissioners to top up the pay of any serving former employee for whom enlistment resulted in a wage cut.

¹⁶ NSA, 12/12633.3, NSW Government Railway & Tramway Commissioners, *Report of the Commissioners for the Year Ended 30 June 1914*, p.1.

£394,064.¹⁷ If the interest payments in 1917 had been the same as in 1914, then the railways would have turned a profit *greater* than the prewar figure.

Fraser and his fellow Commissioners could do nothing about global interest rates. They could, however, do something about labour costs. These may have reduced slightly, but there was a powerful incentive to reduce them further, and the railway workshops, the most labour intensive part of the department's operations, were an obvious place to start. The card system was designed to improve productivity by increasing management control over the work process. It was targeted at the skilled employees in the railway workshops, most particularly the engineers. These were workers whose possession of hard-to-obtain skills was a source of industrial power as well as relatively high pay and prestige. They were employed to make and repair locomotives, and were assigned jobs that ranged from simple tasks to complex and demanding ones. Traditionally, there had been little effective monitoring of work rates. Under the new card system, this relative autonomy would end. One hundred new 'sub-foremen' were to be promoted from amongst the ranks of the tradesmen whose main task would be to monitor the work performance of their fellow employees.¹⁸ Each tradesman would record how long it took him to complete a job on one card while the sub-foreman would also record *his* estimate on another. Most controversially of all, the card filled out by the sub-foreman was to be kept secret from the worker whose work it recorded.¹⁹ By monitoring the performance of his employees in this precise way, Fraser was hoping to obtain the information necessary to adopt 'scientific' management methods.²⁰ 'Troublemakers' would be identified and dealt with. 'Problems' could be eliminated and productivity increased.²¹ Although he

¹⁷ NSA, 12/12633.5, NSW Government Railway & Tramway Commissioners, *Report of the Commissioners for the Year Ended 30 June 1918*, p.1.

¹⁸ *Royal Commission into the Job and Time Card System*, p.62. The ratio was one foreman to forty men.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, p.25. Theoretically they had a right to see the card, but they had to ask. It was pointed out by employees giving evidence to the Time Cards Commission that no-one dared ask to see their card as doing so would lead to 'a black mark'.

²⁰ *Ibid*, p.5. In this regard, Fraser's reply to a question by Commissioner Curlewis was somewhat disingenuous: 'Q. From what you have said already the card system itself is, perhaps, among other things, a system of inquiry? A. It is only to give the Commissioners an opportunity of criticising the work done in that department as effectively as we have been able to criticise it in others.'

²¹ *Ibid*, p.16: 'By means of the cards each sub-foreman has a full and accurate account of all the work that is being performed in his section, and this is useful in the supervision of the work, in as much as he can tell immediately whether excessive time has been taken on any work, whereas in the old system of memorising it would be much more difficult to supervise the work.'; *Ibid*, p.33, the Royal Commissioner asked: 'The card system was no advantage to the Commissioners when a man was doing his work previously, but where

strenuously denied it, Fraser was clearly influenced by Taylorism, the centerpiece of which was the importance of ‘time and motion’ studies.²²

In evidence given to the Royal Commission on the Time Card system, conducted in 1918, Commissioner Fraser argued that in the months following the strike, with the card system in operation, the workshops at Randwick and Eveleigh saw a sixty per cent increase in productivity. He followed this revelation with the comment that ‘it also indicates that the men employed were not doing a fair day’s work,’ to which the judge replied with the question: ‘Either that or they are doing more than a fair day’s work now?’²³

This exchange highlights the two alternative interpretations of the card system. From the point of view of the Railway Commissioners, the skilled workers in the workshops had too much power. They were able to control the rate at which they worked, and this inevitably led to abuses. An interview conducted by Lucy Taksa in 1987 with Leslie Best, a ‘shop boy’ at Eveleigh at the time and a member of the Ironworkers’ Union, is revealing in this regard.²⁴ Best was a ‘lilywhite’ (as rail workers who struck for the duration came to be known) and one would not expect him to agree with the management position. Nevertheless, he admitted in the interview that it was common for the tradesmen to take much more time than they needed to complete a job. Such was the advantage of control and the privilege of being tradesman. This is not all that surprising. To cite another contemporary example, Harry McShane, a Glaswegian socialist and engineer; he recalled in his memoirs working in a shipyard on the Clyde before the First

a man was a slacker the card system would help to detect him?’, and the answer from the witness, a leading hand: ‘Yes. It would find out the weak points, in my opinion.’

²² See, Taksa, ‘*All a Matter of Timing*’, for a detailed and cogent argument regarding the connection between Taylorism and the card system.

²³ *Royal Commission into the Job and Time Card System*, p.5. The 60% figure was somewhat rubbery, as evidence to the commission (*Royal Commission into the Job and Time Card System*, p.30) by an Eveleigh coach builder, Arthur Davenport, demonstrates. He explained that the Commissioners made major cutbacks in the use of materials etc in the months following the strike – such as giving coaches two rather than three coats of varnish.

²⁴ NLA, Oral TRC 2301, NSW Bicentennial oral history collection, INT. 178, Interview with Leslie Best, 8 December 1987.

World War where the nightshift used to sleep on the job, only to be occasionally awoken when someone dropped a hammer and it fell a great distance onto the deck.²⁵

From the point of view of the workers – even if, like Best, they believed that some of their number were abusing the existing system – the introduction of the card system would have appeared ominous. If Fraser and his minions could have been trusted to use the system merely to remedy abuses, it may have been acceptable to his employees. It may have been self-evident to Fraser that:

No progressive business can be satisfactorily conducted without, from time to time, making all possible improvements in methods so as to ensure the maximum efficiency at a minimum of expenditure.²⁶

Commissioner Curlewis had his doubts, however. Even this eminently establishment figure, who managed to avoid ruling unfavourably on the behaviour of the Commissioners, expressed his concerns regarding the card system's potential:

As far as I can see at present all the card does is to give information; what you may choose to do with that information when you have it is a totally different thing; you may use that information for the purposes of tyrannising over the men, sweat a man, and drive him beyond endurance, or you may use it merely to secure a fair return for the wages you pay.²⁷

If a Royal Commission judge was skeptical of Fraser's motives in this regard, what chance was there of the men trusting him? The problem with the notion of 'a fair day's work' is that the contradictory interests of the two contending classes inevitably interpret 'fairness' in an equally contradictory way. On 29 July 1917, a delegation of officials met Commissioner Fraser. In a transcript of the meeting, an Amalgamated Society of Engineers (ASE) organiser named Dengate complained that:

²⁵ Harry McShane and Joan Smith, *Harry McShane: No Mean Fighter*, London: Pluto Press, 1978, p.41 (though it needs to be added that the management in this case had a contract from the British Government that made them indifferent to the productivity of their workforce).

²⁶ NSA, 9/4760, Premier's Department, Inwards Correspondence, Letter from Commissioner Fraser to Minister of Public Works and Premier, 8 August 1917.

²⁷ *Royal Commission into the Job and Time Card System*, p.7.

The [Railway Commissioners'] officers were reading American literature, and they (the society) read a certain amount of that, too, that in many of the shops where the Taylor card system was worked in America that a man was not required after he was 40 years of age.²⁸

It didn't help that some of the American literature read by the workers was supplied by the IWW. The 'Wobblies' had a small presence at Randwick and that presence had been noted with alarm by both Fraser and his political masters. There is still on file in the NSW state archives, amongst the Premier's inwards correspondence, a police report from December 1915 regarding the IWW activity at Randwick. It states that there were seven IWW members at Randwick, the most prominent of whom was a painter, J.E. Baker and that: 'The men have been addressed on three occasions in King Street, Randwick, outside the workshops during lunch hour.' Included in the file are samples of IWW stickers that had been found stuck up around the shop. These advocated sabotage and slow work.²⁹ Not included in the file is the poster that Turner records as having been posted at Randwick at this time. Its wording provides a view of what Commissioner Fraser's 'efficiency' meant from the perspective of the workers:

SLOW WORK MEANS MORE JOBS
MORE JOBS MEANS LESS UNEMPLOYED
LESS COMPETITION MEANS HIGHER WAGES,
LESS WORK, MORE PAY³⁰

For Fraser, the answer to his financial woes must have been obvious. He was operating under the constraint of high interest rates. He could do nothing about that. Nevertheless, the new 'progressive' management practices coming out of America appeared to provide him with an opportunity to improve dramatically the productivity of the workshops. The fact that the IWW had a presence in one of his workshops and were promoting the idea of deliberately working slowly, can only have served to focus his attention on the workshops and on the question of efficiency.

²⁸ *Royal Commission into the Job and Time Card System*, (Exhibit J, 'Notes of Deputation Relative to the introduction of the "Card System" into the railway and tramway workshops', p.75.

²⁹ NSA, 9/4747, Premier's Department, Inwards Correspondence, Police report, 22 December 1917.

³⁰ Turner, *Industrial Labour & Politics*, pp.142-3.

This is not to suggest, however, that increasing efficiency was Fraser's only concern. He was also determined to crush, or at least to weaken significantly, unionism on the railways. Indeed, no serious attempt to reduce labour costs could succeed unless it also involved an assault on unionism. Again, the workshops, the most militant and best-organised sector within the Commissioners' jurisdiction, were the obvious place to begin such an attack. The most contentious element of the card system was the fact that the worker was not allowed to see what the sub-foreman entered on his card. This was a clear recipe for victimisation. It involved a fundamental shift in the power relations of the shop floor away from the employees and towards management. This, along with the promotion of a section of workers into a quasi-supervisory role, was also an attack on union organisation. On the one hand, militants would be vulnerable to being, in effect, framed as 'slow' workers. On the other hand, a layer of workers was separated out from their fellow unionists – the effect of which was demonstrated during the strike when the sub-foremen all scabbed. There were also objections raised during the propaganda war over the strike, that on many occasions workers were unable to complete jobs on time because tools or raw materials were not available.³¹ This might also have enabled management to 'set up' militants by withholding tools and thereby ensuring that they took too long to complete a task.

It is clear, therefore, that it is not necessary to posit a governmental conspiracy to explain the introduction of the card system. The Railway Commissioners had sufficient motive to launch the attack, and the close involvement of the State Government is hardly surprising in what was, after all, a government owned railway system. We may never know to what extent the decision of the Railway Commissioners to throw down the gauntlet was associated with a desire by the State or Federal Governments to attack the labour movement. There is, however, reason to believe that their decision cannot be reduced to a conspiracy instigated by Holman, Fuller or Hughes.

For a provocation to lead to conflict it needs, of course, to engender a response. As we have seen, the skilled employees in the workshops had good reason to fight the new system. It would take away from them the ability to control the speed of their work and they did not trust management to set that speed at a 'fair' rate anymore than

³¹ *Royal Commission into the Job and Time Card System*, p.31.

management trusted them. It would also undermine their union organisation by making victimisation easier to achieve.

More generally, the argument centred on a struggle over two different conceptions of work. Skilled labour in the engineering industry was in many ways highly satisfying. It was intellectually demanding, and was held in high status. Engineers, moreover, worked with a greater degree of autonomy than most blue-collar workers. Taylorism was about more than making people work faster. It involved the reduction of a work process to ‘scientifically’ measured fragments that were expected to be carried out in a way, and in a period of time, determined by management. It meant the end of limited autonomy: a reduction in status from proud artisan to automaton. As a painter complained in evidence to the Time Cards Commission:

For the last thirty years I have always been in charge of a job; any material I wanted I obtained from the store myself; if I wanted turps I would obtain half a gallon; of course, I might not use it all at once, but still I would have it by me. If you appoint me to look after a job and pay me top wages I think if I am not to be trusted to carry it out the only thing is to get rid of me.³²

Finally, the introduction of the card system was seen as an abrogation by Commissioner Fraser of a commitment not to alter working conditions significantly during wartime – reciprocated by the union in the form of a commitment to abstain from offensive industrial action. Taksa made much of this particular point.³³ Basing her argument about betrayal and perceptions of betrayal both on contemporary records and oral history, she emphasised the strikers’ own explanations for their actions. For Taksa, this is indicative of the importance of trust in social relations and of the way in which the break down of that trust may lead to social protest. It might also have been an argument that would have naturally occurred to the strikers as a useful one to emphasise. It cut with the grain of official wartime propaganda and enabled them to defend themselves against the inevitable charges of disloyalty. They could then argue that it was Fraser, not they, who was breaking the national unity needed during the crisis of war. Another way to understand the importance of trust and notions of betrayal at this time is to recall the

³² *Royal Commission into the Job and Time Card System*, p.27.

³³ See in particular, Taksa, ‘Defence not Defiance’.

importance of the recent betrayal of the Labor Party, and the labour movement more generally, by Hughes federally and by Holman at the state level. Workers had been betrayed by their political representatives; now the railway workers were being betrayed by their employer, and the Labor 'rats', especially those in the NSW government, were implicated in both betrayals.

Arguments about Taylorism abounded in the labour press during the strike.³⁴ Archbishop Mannix in Melbourne denounced the iniquities of 'the American system' from the pulpit.³⁵ Yet, for most of the workers who went on strike, Taylorism was not a threat. This was most clearly the case for the wharfies and the coal miners – the two groups whose intervention was central to making the strike 'great'. Miners and wharfies were both employed under conditions that would debar any application of 'scientific' management. We must, therefore look beyond the arguments regarding the card system to understand why they struck.

The starting point has to be an understanding of the period. Taksa was right to criticise Turner's notion that the strike can simply be explained as a manifestation of wartime radicalisation, but it would be wrong to attempt to understand it without the context of the war, and the relations that generally prevailed between the classes at that time. We have already seen how the war was responsible for the financial crisis on the railways. The same economic pressures were responsible for wartime inflation, which had dramatically undermined working class living standards. According to the Piddington Royal Commission on the Basic Wage in 1920, between 1914 and 1917 the cost of living in Sydney rose by twenty three per cent³⁶. Moreover, there is evidence of an even greater increase in the price of food – particularly in Sydney in 1915.³⁷ In the

³⁴ See, for instance, *Labor Call*, 23 August 1917, p. 2.

³⁵ *Labor Call*, 23 August 1917, p. 4.

³⁶ NLA, W.M. Hughes Papers, MS1538, Series 18, *Report of the Commission on the Basic Wage, Together With Evidence*, Melbourne: Federal Parliament, 1920, p.4. See Table 1 for the full range of Piddington's figures. While Piddington's estimate of what constituted a basic wage was controversial, none of his critics challenged his estimate of the yearly increases in the cost of living. *The Victorian Yearbook, 1917-18*, pp.1158-9, is cited in Judith Smart 'Feminists, Food and the Fair Price: The cost of living demonstrations in Melbourne, August – September 1917', *Labour History*, No. 50, May 1986, p. 115. Smart states that prices in Melbourne had increased from 1914 to June 1917 by 28.2% but wages only by 15.4%. Coward, 'Crime and Punishment', pp.62-3, cites the Commonwealth statistician as estimating a 32.8% rise in prices and a 1.75% drop in real wages in NSW from 1914-17.

³⁷ NSW Industrial Gazette Vol. XIII, No.3, 1918, cited in W. Jurkiewicz, *Conspiracy Aspects of the 1917 Strike*, Unpublished Honour's thesis, University of Wollongong, 1976, p.24. Jurkiewicz comments that

first two years of the war, a combination of patriotism and unemployment kept workers from attempting to regain their lost income. By 1916 these restraints had faded and the dam burst. Unemployment eased as the economy adjusted to the initial wartime disruption and as hundreds of thousands of workers enlisted. Patriotism too began to lose its appeal, especially after the Easter Uprising in Ireland and the disaster of the Somme. The first crucial victory was at Broken Hill, where the underground miners won a hard fought victory. They began the fight in late 1915 when, inspired by the slogan, 'If you want the 44 hour week, take it!', they refused to turn up for the Saturday afternoon shift. They were condemned for disloyalty – Broken Hill's minerals were essential to the Allied war effort. They were abandoned by the surface workers, by the workers at the smelter in Port Pirie (who stood up in the mass meeting after voting not to strike and sang 'God Save the King') and by the rest of Broken Hill's labour movement. The underground miners, led by a core of committed socialists, voted, despite their subsequent isolation, to strike in any case and did so in January 1916. With the help of mass pickets, they won a stunning victory.³⁸ By the end of 1916, the isolation of Broken Hill radicals was ended. The year concluded with the defeat of the first conscription referendum and a victorious national strike by the coal miners, who won, among other things, the 40-hour week, bank to bank.³⁹

Three sets of statistics give a glimpse of what was happening. One is the official Labour Department index of real wages. The second set is the yearly measurement by the same department of strike days lost. According to the Labour Department index, if 1,000 represents the average real wage for 1911, this declined to 854 by 1915. 1915 also saw 582,000 strike days lost nationally. In 1916, strike days nearly tripled, reaching 1,678,000, and real wages recovered slightly to 864. In 1917, with the figure for strike days lost soaring to 4,599,700, wages increased to 930. In other words, the war caused an initial plunge in working class living standards, the strike wave of 1916 and 1917 helped recover much of the lost ground, but, on average, workers remained significantly

'...between July 1914 and May 1915 in Melbourne, the price of food and groceries in the Commonwealth rose from 22/11d to 25/5d (based on a weighted average in shillings and pence) and in Sydney from 23/1d to 30/10d' – an increase of 33.57%.

³⁸ Dale, *The Industrial History of Broken Hill*, pp.185-206.

³⁹ Robin Gollan, *The Coalminers of New South Wales*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1963, p.152.

worse off than they had been in 1913.⁴⁰ The final set of statistics records the unemployment rate. Unemployment in 1913 was 6.5 per cent. It increased to 8.3 per cent in 1914 and 9.3 per cent in 1915. 1916 saw a dramatic drop to 5.8 per cent, after which figures climbed again in 1917 to 7.1 per cent (the peak figure being for the fourth quarter, October to December when the figures reached 7.4 per cent).⁴¹ The initial rise in 1915 was exacerbated by disruption of trade, which hit the Australian economy particularly hard with the onset of hostilities; Germany, for example, had been a significant export market. Unemployment has a contradictory effect on the working class and the labour movement. It can be a cause for anger and bitterness, but it also weakens the strategic position of the movement, forcing workers to keep their heads down and allowing management to use the threat of dismissal to subdue militancy. The decline in unemployment in 1916 no doubt helped encourage the strike wave that began in that year.

Curiously, the increase in unemployment in 1917 did not have a dampening effect on the strike wave, though it no doubt contributed to the ease with which working class ‘volunteers’ were to be recruited during the Great Strike. Part of the explanation for this may lie in the extent of the radicalisation of the labour movement by early 1917, which reached a point where a slight increase in unemployment would, most likely, simply add to workers’ anger rather than intimidate them. Such an attitude appears to be reflected in the labour press where there was much talk of ‘economic conscription’, a deliberate policy by the government and employers to force workers to enlist through retrenchment. There is also the fact that the yearly rate would have been boosted significantly by unemployment associated with the Great Strike itself – hence the high figure for the fourth quarter. It was, in fact, only 6.3 per cent when the strike began, and rose to 7.4 per cent for the last quarter of the year.⁴² Tens of thousands of workers, quite apart from those on strike, were stood down during the dispute due to lack of coal or disruption of trade caused by transport strikes. Many of the strikers, even those who weren’t permanently replaced by scabs, were not re-employed. Many were re-employed only after trade revived. The coal strike continued into October, and it took many coal-

⁴⁰ *Commonwealth Labour Report*, No’s 2 & 14, cited in Turner, *Industrial Labour and Politics*, p. 252, provides the figures for the decline in real wages.

⁴¹ *Quarterly Summary of Australian Statistics, Bulletin 78*, Melbourne: Department of Labour and Industry, December 1919, p.106.

⁴² *Ibid.*

dependant industries some time to recover to their normal levels of activity. Many employers also took the opportunity to 'rationalise' their defeated workforces, making more work for less.

One limitation of statistics is that they only give average figures. There may, for instance, have been groups of workers who managed to increase their real wages in 1916 and 1917. We know that the coal miners and the Broken Hill miners both achieved historic reductions in their working hours. Other groups of workers would not have done so well. The thousands of working class families dependant on soldiers' pay had no recourse to strike action, though some soldier's wives in Melbourne may well have joined in the riotous demonstrations in Melbourne over the cost of living in late 1917.⁴³ The contrast between the coal miners and the wharfies is interesting in this regard. The coal miners on the northern collieries saw their minimum daily wage rate rise from 8/ to 9/1d on 9 January 1916 (by order of Justice Higgins), to 10/11d on 1 January 1917 (as a consequence of the coal strike), and again to 13/6d on 3 June 1919, (by order of the acting Prime Minister).⁴⁴ The wharfies, by contrast, after having received their first federal award in 1914 from Justice Higgins, with a rate of 1/9d per hour, had to wait until 1919 before their second federal award, again granted by Higgins, increased the hourly rate to 2/3d per hour.⁴⁵ The miners, with their matchless traditions of militancy and organisation, received a series of increases, which by 1919 amounted to 56.77 per cent of the 1914 figure. The wharfies received the one increase in 1919, which amounted to only 28.57 per cent of the 1914 figure. Significantly, the Piddington Commission established that the cost of living across the different states had risen over this period between 56.5 per cent and 75.2 per cent.⁴⁶ This is evident in the table below.

⁴³ Smart 'Feminists, Food and the Fair Price'.

⁴⁴ ANU, NBA, ACSEF papers, E165/10/9, 'Position on the Northern Coalfield of New South Wales May 1929', Northern Collieries Association, p.14.

⁴⁵ ANU, NBA, WWF papers, Z248/ Box 120, typewritten history of wage rates for waterside workers.

⁴⁶ See Table 1.

Table 1: Percentage Increase in Cost of Living from 1914⁴⁷

Year	Sydney	Melbourne	Brisbane	Adelaide	Perth	Hobart
1914-15	11.7%	13.3%	11.2%	11%	6%	12.4%
1914-16	15.8%	14.3%	15.4%	11.8%	11.5%	13.1%
1914-17	23%	21.3%	23.8%	16.9	15.7%	27.1%
1914-18	29.8%	31.1%	34.3%	27.7%	22.5%	32.5%
1914-19	60.5%	72%	65.9%	63.1%	56.5%	75.2%

Even more important than the variations in the economic experience of groups of workers were the variations in their industrial experience. How else is it possible, for instance, to explain the relative passivity of Victorian railway workers during the Great Strike, while the Wonthaggi miners and the wharfies on the Melbourne waterfront struck? The Wonthaggi coal miners had taken part in the miners' great victory in 1916. By contrast, unionism on the Victorian railways had been dealt a great blow with the defeat of a big strike in 1903, and had never fully recovered. A Victorian railway union official was cited by the *Age* – after leaving a national meeting of railway unionists in August which decided against attempting to mobilise solidarity in Victoria – as saying that 'there are too many scabs in Victoria for any successful industrial effort'.⁴⁸ The Tramway Union in NSW also suffered from the effects of a prewar defeat – in 1908.⁴⁹ The tram workers struck in 1917, but there was significant scabbing from within their ranks and the tram service operated at workable levels almost from the beginning of the dispute. Some of the workers who returned are quoted in the press as citing the 1908 defeat as a factor in their decision to scab. The general attitude of the Tramway Union was summed up in its journal after the strike:

⁴⁷ NLA, W.M.Hughes Papers, MS1538, Series 18, *Report of the Commission on the Basic Wage, Together With Evidence*, Melbourne: Federal Parliament, 1920, p.4.

⁴⁸ *Age*, 15 August 1917, p.9.

⁴⁹ H.V. Evatt, *Australian Labour Leader: The story of W.A. Holman and the Labour Movement*, Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1954, p.163-6. The strike was opposed by the Labor state government of Holman, who threatened to enlist volunteers – a tactic that anticipated the Nationalist response to the 1917 strike.

The strike was not called nor sought by the Tramway Union – it was none of our members' making, but its whirlwind force touched us and temporarily submerged us. The Tramway Union has never posed as a strike body – rather its aim and policy has been framed and shaped on arbitration lines.⁵⁰

The Broken Hill miners and the NSW coal miners had also suffered significant defeats in 1908. But both groups of workers had recovered and had, as we have seen, won significant victories by 1917. Clearly there are defeats that are wholly negative in their consequences and defeats from which positive lessons can be learned. The reasons why different groups of workers reacted differently to the memory of pre-war defeats involves a complex of factors involving the specific nature of those defeats, and their experience since. Not the least important appears to be the existence, or absence, of a radical minority within their ranks. Such a minority certainly existed within both groups of miners.

Another difference in experience is simply the absence or otherwise of a history of strike activity. This can be seen most clearly within the ranks of the railway unions in NSW. There were militant sections within the service, most notably the railway workshops themselves. We have noted the IWW presence at Randwick. There had been a large number of sectional disputes at Randwick and Eveleigh in 1917 before the Great Strike began in August. There had also been a number of sectional disputes within other sections of the railway service – such as strikes by porters at Darling Harbour.⁵¹ These were mostly initiated by the rank and file and tended to involve younger workers, epitomised by the walkout by apprentices in July 1917. It was described by the journal of the Australian Rail and Tramway Service Association (the main railway union), the *All Grades Advocate*: 'Just before the big strike there was the boys' strike at Randwick, and 13 unions vainly essayed the task of coping with these ostropolous [sic] youths.'⁵²

There were also sections of the service with little or no tradition of industrial activity. Claude Thompson, the secretary of the ARTSA, in an attempt to explain to the press how Commissioner Fraser had antagonised his workforce, boasted in early August that 'even' the Permanent Way workers, who had 'never been on strike', were now

⁵⁰ *The Railway & Tramway Record*, 2 October 1917, p.1.

⁵¹ Greg Patmore, A history of industrial relations in the N.S.W. government railways: 1855-1929, Sydney University: Unpublished PhD thesis, 1985, pp.336-7.

⁵² *All Grades Advocate*, 18 October 1917, p.7.

considering joining the strike due to anger at Fraser's decision to challenge their recently improved award in the industrial court. Unfortunately, this section's history of industrial passivity proved to be more of an indicator of their mood than their anger at Commissioner Fraser. Approximately half of the Permanent Way scabbed during the Great Strike. The ARTSA also had difficulty making the strike stick in the Traffic Section and more generally in the small towns throughout NSW, where relatively small groups of workers, isolated in conservative rural communities, proved less motivated to strike than the union's metropolitan membership.⁵³ In the case of the other major railway union, the Locomotive Engine Drivers, Firemen and Cleaners' Association, there were two divisions. The first was between the metropolitan section of the union, which was militant, and the rest of the state, which was not. This division again reflects the difference between the political/industrial environment of Sydney compared with the more conservative rural areas. The other division was between the cleaners, who were the most radical element, at least in Sydney, and the drivers, the aristocracy of the railways.

The three grades of service covered by this union, and included in its name, represented three rungs on a ladder within the service. Cleaners were not just workers who removed litter from carriages or hosed dust and mud off the wheels. The bulk of their job involved cleaning the engine and required a good knowledge of how the machine worked. It was from the ranks of the cleaners that firemen were selected, and it was always firemen who were promoted to drivers. Driver Ben Chifley was earning in 1917 more than five times the salary he had drawn as an unskilled 'yard boy' in 1906.⁵⁴ Nor was it simply a question of salary. Drivers were highly regarded members of the community – especially important in country towns where minute demarcations of status were often applied with an exactitude that might have impressed Saint-Simon.⁵⁵ They were distinguished by their uniform and by the special watch that each carried. They also

⁵³ This is dealt with in greater detail in Chapter Four. It explains the high level of 'scabbing' in smaller towns such as Taree, Harden, Gundagai etc. However, if a town was large enough and/or had the right sort of industrial traditions, relative isolation and local loyalties could actually be a force for cohesion and strength. Bathurst and Lithgow are examples of this alternative phenomenon.

⁵⁴ David Day, *Chifley*, Sydney: HarperCollins, 2001, p.71. Chifley started on 3 shillings a day. His pay was doubled when he was promoted to labourer (on his 21st birthday). By 1917, as a driver, he was earning 15 shillings a day.

⁵⁵ Day, *Chifley*, p.89.

were recipients of a generous superannuation scheme. The latter was to cause problems during the strike. Drivers were, as one might expect, the oldest members of the Locomotive Engine Drivers, Firemen and Cleaners' Union, and cleaners the youngest. There are many reports in the press of drivers near retirement age refusing to join the strike or returning prematurely due to concern about their pensions. It is perhaps no coincidence that the one picture of a 'scab' driver proudly displayed during the strike by the pictorial *Sydney Mail* reveals a figure with an impressive grey beard.⁵⁶ The cleaners were, therefore, by definition, younger, and less well paid. They were less likely to be concerned about their pensions or to have family responsibilities. It is hardly surprising that they are described as forming the core of the militants within the metropolitan branch of the 'loco men'.

Another element in preparing the groundwork for the strike is the role of the far left, which had grown in influence during the war. The obvious candidate for influencing the strike was the IWW. Childe described the strike as being 'largely influenced' by the IWW doctrines, no doubt referring in particular to the concepts of one big union and the 'scientific general strike'.⁵⁷ This belief of Childe's is not to be confused with the conspiracy theories of the establishment press. He understood that the IWW had been broken by August 1917; he did not believe that it in any way organised the strike. He was referring instead to the influence its doctrines had had upon a crucial layer of workers – especially younger workers in Sydney. As someone who was active in the labour movement at the time, Childe's views have to be taken seriously, but they have to be tested against the available evidence.

The IWW reached its greatest heights in terms of size and influence in late 1916 and early 1917. Estimates of its membership vary wildly. However, it probably numbered around 2,000 with 1,500 members within metropolitan Sydney. Its newspaper, *Direct Action*, peaked at a circulation of around 15,000.⁵⁸ In addition, thousands more would have attended the large and popular meetings, or been affected in some way by

⁵⁶ *Sydney Mail*, 22 August 1917, p.11. However, it is possible that he could also have been a driver called back out of retirement.

⁵⁷ Childe, *How Labour Governs*, p.150.

⁵⁸ Burgmann, *Revolutionary Industrial Unionism*, p.126. Burgmann also points out in 'The iron heel: The suppression of the IWW during World War One', Sydney Labour History Group, *What Rough Beast? The State & Social Order in Australia*, Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1982, p.187, that the actual size of the IWW has been a matter of great controversy, with estimates ranging from 2,000 to 30,000.

‘wobbly’ propaganda. The very extent to which the IWW was taken up by the right as a bogeyman would have ensured a curiosity regarding its doctrines. The organisation had been banned in early 1917, and the final show trial of its activists took place during the strike.

How then can we judge the influence of the IWW? One way is to look at the groups of workers amongst whom the organisation is understood to have had some influence. Here there is a direct correlation with involvement in the strike. We have noted the ‘wobbly’ presence in the Randwick workshops. They were strong in Broken Hill and had a presence on the coalfields – the miners who were unsuccessfully framed for the Coledale shooting (see Chapter Four, below) were allegedly members. A faint but interesting trace of their influence is the popularity of the IWW anthem, ‘Solidarity For Ever’. It was widely sung on the demonstrations and militants among the painters and dockers were reported to have sung it triumphantly as they exited the mass meeting that voted to strike.⁵⁹ The song was written in the U.S. in January 1915 and popularised in Australia by the IWW.⁶⁰ This doesn’t prove that everyone who sang it was a member or supporter of the IWW. The song had already begun to make its way beyond the confines of that organisation’s song sheets towards its current status as a song that belongs to the labour movement as a whole. Yet it is hard to imagine at this early stage that most of the workers who sang the song were unaware of its origins. This assumes significance given the official demonology of the IWW and the way in which so many of the official union bodies and the labour press were determined to defend themselves against any suspicion of connection with the banned organisation.

In any case it is probably best to view the IWW not as a phenomenon in isolation. It was not the only far left organisation to grow during the war, although in NSW it tended to overshadow the various socialist groups. The largest of these, the Australian Socialist Party, was in any case too sectarian and propagandist to intervene effectively in the labour movement (though its section at Broken Hill was an exception to this –

⁵⁹ See Chapter Three below, note 63.

⁶⁰ See: <http://www.fortunecity.com/tinpan/parton/2/solid.html> (accessed 6 February 2006) for a description of the song’s genesis.

containing many of the more important industrial leaders at the Barrier).⁶¹ The Victorian Socialist Party (VSP) was a different beast. Its integration within the labour movement is evidenced by small things such as the tendency for unions such as the Seamen and the Timberworkers (the latter had been led for a number of years by the VSP member, John Curtin) to hold their meetings in the VSP's 'Socialist Hall' in Exhibition Street.⁶² By 1915, in fact, there were members of the VSP representing at least eleven unions on the Victorian Trades Hall, and this did not include their most important official, Frank Hyett, the secretary of the Victorian Railways Union (which was not affiliated).⁶³

Another popular Melbourne venue for mass meetings was the Guild Hall in Swanston Street, owned by Vida Goldstein's Women's Political Association (WPA), a large and powerful middle class feminist organisation that had shifted dramatically to the left under the impact of the war. The WPA was defiantly anti-war and increasingly identified itself with the far left of the labour movement. It actively supported the strike, turning the basement of its hall into a 'commune' to provide free food and clothing for the strikers. One of its speakers even addressed a Yarra Bank meeting from a motorcar draped with a banner that read 'Workers of the World Unite!'⁶⁴ Curiously, the WPA's shift to the left was insufficient for one of its more prominent members, Adela Pankhurst, who left in December 1916 to join the VSP.⁶⁵ Pankhurst developed a particularly close relationship with the Melbourne wharfies and was described by the VSP's paper (with how much accuracy one can only guess) as having been 'largely responsible' for the banning of food exports by the Melbourne wharfies during much of 1917.⁶⁶ She and another VSP member, Jenny Baines, were, however, undoubtedly responsible for the impressive and riotous food demonstrations that climaxed during the course of the strike

⁶¹ Ern Wetherall, *Industrial History of the Stormy Years 1910-1921*, (Manuscript held in the Broken Hill Library). Wetherall himself appears to have been a member of the ASP.

⁶² *Age*, 18 September 1917, p.5, for instance, carries a report of a Timberworkers' Union meeting at the Socialist Hall.

⁶³ Geoffrey Charles Hewitt, *A History of the Victorian Socialist Party, 1906-1932*, Unpublished MA Thesis, Latrobe University, 1974, p.193, mentions that VSP members were elected as delegates to the Victorian Trades Hall from eleven unions including the Timberworkers, the Blacksmiths, the Painters, the Storemen and Packers, the Pastrycooks, Tuckpointers, Agricultural Instrument Makers, Garment Makers, Musicians, Theatrical Employees and Clerks.

⁶⁴ *Age*, 30 August 1917, p.7.

⁶⁵ J.M. Bomford, *That Dangerous and Persuasive Woman: Vida Goldstein*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1993, p.170.

⁶⁶ *The Socialist*, 7 September 1917, p.4.

as thousands of working class men and women took to the darkened streets of Melbourne, wreaking havoc throughout the shopping districts of the CBD and inner city (see Chapter Four, below).

The strike wave, fuelled by the economic stresses of war, fed into this radicalisation, and intersected with a growing discontent with the war in general and conscription in particular. The intersection was made concrete in late 1916 when an Australian Trades Union Anti-Conscription Congress, held in Melbourne, called on all unions to hold ‘simultaneous stop-work meetings of 24 hours’ duration, to receive and decide upon recommendations from the National Executive for further action.’ The consequent one-day strike against conscription took place on 4 October 1916.⁶⁷

Feeding into the wartime discontent were the troubles in Ireland. The opportunities for the left were clearly understood by the IWW. In an intercepted letter to Sydney from Melbourne in September 1916, Tom Barker, the IWW leader, commented: ‘Archbishop Mannix cut loose on conscription on Sunday. The Irish are simmering here.’ In another letter, in December, he wrote:

I suggest if Larkin [a brother of James Larkin, the Irish syndicalist, and one of the IWW Twelve] appeals his latest case that he follow the Town Hall lecture with one mid-week meeting at the Guildhall in Melbourne in the same strain. It is a certainty that it will bring him and the rest of the boys the sympathy of the Irish population, who are anxiously looking for some one to take the initiative about the shooting of Skeffington, and Connelly and others.⁶⁸

Later, in July 1917, the police raided the IWW premises in Sydney and forced the crowd of 600 present to give their names and addresses. The reply of one woman to the question, ‘Are you a member of the IWW?’, was noted by the author of the police report with particular horror: ‘Yes, and a Fenian too!’⁶⁹ It is hard today to remember a time when to be Catholic was to be treated as a potential traitor or where the church was capable of producing figures as oppositional as Mannix or the priest in Fremantle’s St

⁶⁷ NLA, Lloyd Ross Papers, MS3939, Box 46, Australian Trades Union Anti-Conscription Congress: Manifesto, No.7. The Manifesto is signed ‘J Curtin, 26 September 1917’.

⁶⁸ NSA, 7/5588-2, Police Special Bundles, Letters from Tom Barker to ‘Tom’, 18 September and 14 December 1916.

⁶⁹ NSA, 5/75/3, Chief Secretary’s Inward Correspondence, Police Report on Raid of IWW premises, 23 July 1917.

Patrick's who, on 'Bloody Sunday', February 1919, instructed his congregation to leave and join the pickets confronting Premier Colebatch and his party of scabs.⁷⁰ There was, then, a general radicalisation, deeper amongst the Irish perhaps, but not confined to that section of the working class. It is little wonder that the organised left grew in size and influence.

This becomes even clearer if we do not to restrict our understanding of the 'far left' to organisations. Figures such as Percy Brookfield and his supporters in Broken Hill or Jock Garden, the leader of the 'Trades Hall Reds' in Sydney (at the time of the strike, a minor official employed by the Labor Council after having been victimised from a government job) indicate the existence of a syndicalist, or at least quasi-syndicalist, current that extended far beyond the ranks of the IWW. This was an era in which it was normal for thousands to attend the Sunday meetings of the left at the Yarra Bank in Melbourne and the Domain in Sydney.⁷¹ What marks this most clearly is the extent of enthusiasm for 'direct action' amongst a growing layer of younger workers. This is evidenced again and again in reports of mass meetings throughout the strike. Most union bodies, especially in metropolitan Sydney, seem to have had a significant layer of mostly younger workers for whom arbitration was a dead end, and whose enthusiasm for direct action at any cost was their defining feature.

This group of workers did not have to wait for history to treat them with condescension. They are largely silent in the pages of the labor press, their voices heard, discordant, distorted and in fragments, mainly in the establishment press. Their voice is a collective one, heard in triumph: singing 'Solidarity For Ever' on monster demonstrations or as they filed out of mass meetings where their energy and noise had helped to carry the day. It is heard in what the *Age* chose to describe as 'the shrieks of women and the hoots of senseless young men' as they chanted 'mob rule' and followed Adela Pankhurst towards the Federal Parliament in Melbourne.⁷² It is also heard in the anger and dismay, which met the news that the strike had been called off. Here at last we begin to discern some individual voices, though they remain unnamed. Some are described as moving

⁷⁰ Stuart MacIntyre, *Militant: The Life and Times of Paddy Troy*, Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1984, p.9. See Chapter Six for a full description of the riot at Fremantle.

⁷¹ NSA, 7/5589, Police Special Bundles, 'Police Reports of Meetings in the Domain.'

⁷² See Chapter Three below, note 105.

motions of no confidence in the Defence Committee or in their own officials. Others chalked notices outside Trades Hall agitating for an emergency meeting to overturn the settlement. Their anonymity belies the urgency and importance of their actions; they were attempting to make their own history.

We may never know who, amongst the ranks of the loco. men in metropolitan Sydney, initiated the move to approach the transport unions with a view to continuing the strike after their own leaders had capitulated. We know that nothing came of it. The virus of direct action had infected a large enough layer of the working class in Eastern Australia to turn what had been, in the prewar years, largely a slogan of isolated sects into reality. The leadership of the movement remained firmly in the hands of officials of an older generation for whom arbitration was a panacea, and their younger opponents had, as yet, no notion of how to organise an alternative to their leadership.

Chapter Three: The Explosion

On 14 August 1917 readers of the *Sydney Morning Herald* were treated to the following passage by Mr. W.D. Carmalt, the manager of the refreshment rooms at Central Station. He was relating the scandalous behaviour of the young women whom he employed as waitresses.

For the past few days the girls had been rather out of hand. They were inclined to laugh and jeer at those over them, and discipline was being seriously affected. Acting under instructions, I called them all together this morning. I explained to them that they were there in the public interest, to serve anyone who should come along. [They had refused to serve some 'volunteers'.] I then asked those who were willing to abide by that course to stand to one side, and those that were prepared to leave to do so. Thereupon they all put on their hats and coats and marched off, amidst laughter and cheers.¹

The behaviour of these young women may have scandalised their manager and the respectable middle class readers of the *Herald*. It was, however, typical of the way in which the strike spread, particularly in the first few weeks of August. This was a strike characterised, for the most part, not by grim determination and stoic resistance so much as by exuberance and larrikin energy. The strike may have been defensive, but, regardless of at least one banner that appeared in the street processions in Sydney that month, its mood was also defiant.²

It began with a walkout on 2 August by 5,789 strikers, mainly from the Randwick and Eveleigh workshops. This followed the failure of various delegations of union officials to obtain any compromise from the Chief Railway Commissioner, Fraser or the Acting Premier, Fuller, regarding the implementation of the card system into the workshops. The railway and tramway workshops at Randwick and Eveleigh were two of the largest workplaces in the state, with a workforce numbering in the thousands, covered by a great number of unions.³ The issue of the card system was first brought before the Labor Council on 26 July by the Electrical Trades Union

¹ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 August 1917, p.5, records that the kitchen staff also walked out. However, with the assistance of the manager of the State Bakery (the delightfully named 'Mr. Boss'), and volunteers recruited from amongst the passengers at the station, Carmalt was able to keep the rooms functioning.

² *Daily Telegraph*, 16 August 1917, p.6, noted that, amongst the crowd of 20,000 in the Domain the previous day, a group of railway ticket collectors and examiners held up a banner declaring 'Defence not Defiance'.

³ NSW Legislative Assembly, *The New South Wales Strike Crisis, 1917*, p.58.

(ETU) in order to assure a combined response by the affected unions.⁴ Prior to this point, the desire to oppose the system was initially driven by the rank and file without much official encouragement. As Dengate, an Amalgamated Society of Engineers (ASE) organiser, pointed out to Commissioner Fraser at a meeting on 31 July 1917:

The system was introduced yesterday week, and the men demanded a stopwork meeting. There were no officers in this at all. We advised them not to have a stop-work meeting, but found a hall for the employees to meet in, and none of the officers attended the meeting...They appointed from that meeting representatives representing fourteen unions – no officials.⁵

The head of the Labor Council, E.J. Kavanagh, later recalled that he ‘urged [the various officials representing the workers at the workshops] to endeavour to induce their members to keep working pending a conference of all the unions concerned’.⁶ This proved so difficult that when the Labor Council met on 30 July:

Owing to the reports of the union representatives that they were unable to restrain their members from ceasing work, and thus defying all union authority, the members of the Labor Council’s Executive refused to vote on any question on the grounds that the Council could not, under its constitution, be held responsible for that which it had not full control of.⁷

The Council, nevertheless, felt it worthwhile, unarmed though it was by an official position on the matter, to send delegations to interview Commissioner Fraser. They met with him on 29 July and again on 31 July.⁸ They were offered a ‘compromise’ by which Fraser promised to review the system after three months. Kavanagh was inclined to accept this:

Realising the seriousness of the matter I advised against this course [striking], and urged that the offer of the Railway Commissioner to give the system a three month trial be accepted. In answer to this a number of members of the Committee stated that it would be futile to submit such a proposal to the men, as they were determined not to work under the system regardless of the cost.⁹

⁴ Labor Council of NSW, *Report and Balance Sheet For the Half-Year Ending December 31st 1917*, p.9.

⁵ *Royal Commission into the Job and Time Card System*, Exhibits J1, (shorthand transcripts of deputation, 31 July 1917), p.83.

⁶ Labor Council of NSW, *Report and Balance Sheet*, p.9.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Royal Commission into the Job and Time Card System*, Exhibits J & J1, pp.74-84.

⁹ Labor Council of NSW, *Report and Balance Sheet*, p.10.

He was not able to prevent the strike; he was to have just as little success in containing it.

The strike began at 9 a.m. on 2 August. *The Telegraph* reported that 5,780 struck, including 3,000 at Eveleigh and 1,300 at Randwick.¹⁰ The *Sun* provided details of where the rest of the strikers were, including the Clyde Repair shops, some of the signalling shops, and some of the ‘car-shed men’ in tram depots.¹¹ Also affected were the railway workshops in the Newcastle district, Honeysuckle Creek, Port Waratah and Hamilton.¹² The strike then began, and Kavanagh would have preferred it to remain as predominantly a strike of the skilled workers in the railway workshops, even though in some cases the unions had not endorsed their members striking.¹³ There appears to have been little effort at this stage to bring out any workers outside of the metropolitan region. In Lismore, for example, the district secretary of the Australasian Society of Engineers (ASE) remained ‘in the dark’ regarding the strike. The local secretary of the coachmakers had managed to contact his superior in Sydney, ‘but other than asking him to “keep in touch” Lismore members had not been instructed to down tools.’¹⁴ A sign of things to come was a one-day walkout by the coal miners at Coledale on the South Coast ‘in view of the possibility of not being able to get a train back in the afternoon’ due to the strike.¹⁵ More important in the short term was the decision on the second day of the strike by the ‘fuelmen’, members of the Federated Engine Drivers’ Association (FEDFA) at Eveleigh, to strike rather than ‘to lift material which had been handled by men who

¹⁰ *Daily Telegraph* 3 August 1917, p.5.

¹¹ *Sun*, 2 August 1917, p.5

¹² *Newcastle Herald and Miners’ Advocate*, 3 August 1917, p.4, states that ‘between six and seven hundred’ struck at these three shops. *Daily Telegraph*, 3 August 1917, p.5.

¹³ See, for instance, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 3 August 1917, p.8: ‘When asked as to the attitude of the Amalgamated Society of Carpenters and Joiners towards the strike, Mr Newberry, secretary to the executive board, said, yesterday, that the question had never been before the board. Up to the present he did not know officially as to what was happening to the members of the society.’ Also, see *Daily Telegraph*, 3 August 1917, p.5: ‘Some of the members of the Electrical Trades Union at the Randwick shops (said the secretary of that body, Mr. Black) had ceased work, but the union had so far instructed no men to strike.’

¹⁴ *Northern Star* (Lismore), 3 August 1917, p.4.

¹⁵ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 3 August 1917, p.8. Incidentally, NSW Legislative Assembly Report, *NSW Strike Crisis*, 5 February 1918, pp.58-9, in a meticulous listing of all strike activity associated with the Great Strike, leaves off this one day strike. A number of such omissions demonstrate the difficulty of accurately recording all the details of such an extensive and explosive strike and suggests that the official figures provided by the Federal Bureau of Statistics probably understate the total numbers involved and the strike days lost over the strike’s course.

had taken the place of strikers'.¹⁶ This was the first example of what was to become known as 'the black doctrine', the main mechanism by which the strike was to spread. The fuelmen were strategically important, as they were the one group of workers at Eveleigh whose job was essential to the day-to-day running of the railways; they filled the trains with coal.

On the strike's second day it also began to spread to country workshops, as ASE members and boilermakers walked out in Bathurst, Cowra, Orange, Wellington and Dubbo.¹⁷ The boilermakers and ironworkers in the Newcastle workshops joined the dispute.¹⁸ The moulders, who had not joined the strike on the first day (as apparently they were unaffected by the card system) also joined it on the second day. They found that all their labourers were on strike 'and as they objected to working with others in their place, they left the shop at the lunch hour'.¹⁹ Only the day before, the executive of the Moulders' Union had voted not to strike²⁰; now their secretary, Mr. Bathgate, was forced to revise his position:

Our men are out simply on a matter of union principle. Our attitude, simply as the dispute is concerned, is unchanged. If our men could have remained at work without infringing on the work of other men they would have done so...So far as the card system is concerned we have never discussed it. When we have a grievance then we will deal with it.²¹

It was the decision of the fuelmen to strike, however, which was to prove most important:

The entrance of the fuelmen into the struggle opens up very grave considerations. Yesterday a few engines were coaled by some departmental clerks. The enginedrivers and firemen at once objected to running engines so loaded with what they call 'black coal'. There were ugly rumours of the drivers and firemen coming out and laying up the whole railway service, but this has been avoided so far.²²

¹⁶ *Sun*, 3 August 1917, p.5.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 August 1917, p.14.

¹⁹ *Daily Telegraph*, 4 August 1917, p.12.

²⁰ *Daily Telegraph*, 3 August 1917, p.5: 'The executive of the Moulders' Union decided that members of that body should not come out, as they had no dispute. The executive, said the secretary (Mr. Bathgate), recognised that there was a difference between a reason for a strike and an excuse for a strike.'

²¹ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 August 1917, p.13.

²² *Ibid.*

The enginedrivers' union shared in the general reluctance of officials to join in the strike:

'The matter has not reached us yet; we have nothing to do with it at present', is all Mr. Ainsworth, secretary of the Loco. Engine Drivers' and Firemen's Association, had to say last night in reference to the strike. Questioned as to the possibilities of the future, the secretary would commit himself no further than to say that his executive had not yet considered its attitude in regard to the dispute.²³

Ainsworth was, however, to prove unable to restrain his members from joining the fray. They met on 4 August and the Sydney afternoon paper, the *Sun*, noted that 'the irresponsible section...was so noisy that the responsible officers had considerable difficulty in explaining matters'.²⁴ Eventually, despite the 'responsible officer's best efforts', the members voted 'by a large majority' to strike.²⁵ Later in August, the *Herald* published an account of the meeting by an anonymous 'engine-driver who has remained loyal'.

There were about 350 men at the meeting on Saturday, August 4. They were composed chiefly of cleaners and firemen. There was [sic] a fair number of elderly men who have seen service for a number of years. From the start of the meeting there was nothing but a howling mob, as many as 50 yelling out at once. It soon got out of control of the chairman, and although the cries of 'Order' were frequent no notice was taken. When the resolution was moved declaring the strike several of the older men (who could see what was meant) got up and spoke against the motion. They were simply howled down, and further to confuse them a section of the younger members of the meeting started playing the piano and chorusing out rag-time songs deliberately to knock the speakers off their balance. Finding their attempt to speak frustrated, several of the older members got up and left the room, amongst them one of our best and most respected drivers. This man came to work, and stayed in for some days until the cowardly pickets made it impossible for him to stop. They formed a picket round his house, and so terrified his wife and family that he was forced to remain at home for the protection of his loved ones. After these

²³ *Daily Telegraph*, 3 August 1917, p.5.

²⁴ *Sun*, 4 August 1917, p.5.

²⁵ *Sun*, 5 August 1917, p.1; *Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 August 1917, p.8, carried a report of the loco men's meeting which also stresses the 'boisterous' nature of the proceedings: 'There was a large attendance of members at the meeting. They came and went during the proceedings, which at times were rather of a boisterous character, the younger element losing control of itself. From inquiries it was ascertained that many of the men are loath to cease work, and are determined to carry on as long as they are able. As many of the level-headed members left the hall they did not try to hide their utter disgust in regard to the whole strike question, and spoke in very strong terms of the "red-rag" behaviour of a section of the meeting. An official of the union said he did not see why they should be drawn into the trouble.'

men left the meeting, of course, it was quite an easy matter to get this resolution passed...The result of the ballot (which was only a show of hands virtually) was 318 to 33 in favour of a strike.²⁶

While this has to be read with some scepticism as the self-justificatory account of a 'loyalist', it nevertheless accords with other accounts in emphasising the youth and enthusiasm of the militants, as well as confirming that the cleaners and firemen were more militant than the drivers. In any case, the vote to strike was passed and, as this meeting was of the metropolitan division of the union, it resulted in an immediate strike by 750 drivers, firemen and cleaners in Sydney.

Elsewhere in the railways there was other pressure to extend the strike. Railway porters from Central Station rang up their union, the ARTSA, demanding to know why they had not been called on strike.²⁷ The *Herald* reported that, on the same Saturday, a meeting of the ARTSA passed a resolution urging the Defence Committee to declare coal black and call out the Tramway Union.²⁸ The strike had already begun to spread to sections of the shunters, fitters, signalmen and guards – all members of the ARTSA or the Traffic Association.²⁹

As early as 3 August, along with the strike at Coledale, a number of miners on the south coast had refused to travel to work on trains as they feared that they may be stranded by a strike or, worse, be faced with having to travel home on a scab train.³⁰ By 6 August, 250 locomotive drivers, firemen and cleaners in Bathurst had joined their Sydney colleagues' strike.³¹ Four hundred were on strike at Goulburn.³² Also on 6 August, at least 1,000 miners on the south coast, from Coledale, Scarborough, and New Tunnel were idle.³³ That night, the Defence Committee declared coal black and called on all employees of the railway and tramway services to strike. The Tramways Union and ARTSA both complied and called their members out throughout the state. At midnight the tramways stopped running.³⁴ Also walking out at midnight were the Greta and Aberdare branch of the ARTSA; their railway

²⁶ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 August 1917, p.8.

²⁷ *Daily Telegraph*, 3 August 1917, p.5.

²⁸ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 August 1917, p.8.

²⁹ *Ibid*; See also *Barrier Miner*, 6 August 1917, p.1, which states that '70 shunters went on strike in Sydney yesterday'.

³⁰ *Daily Telegraph*, 4 August 1917, p.12.

³¹ *Barrier Miner*, 7 August 1917, p.2.

³² *Ibid*.

³³ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 August 1917, p.8; *Daily Telegraph*, 6 August 1917, p.6, states 3,000 were off work.

³⁴ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 7 August 1917, p.7.

serviced the Maitland coalfields. The 7,000 miners at Maitland lived close enough to their pits to walk to work, so they were not immediately affected; however, without trains to take the coal away, the hoppers at these pits would be full within one or two days and the miners would have to cease work or load coal into wagons brought by scabs.³⁵

One by one from 7 - 10 August collieries on the South Coast, Newcastle, Maitland and Lithgow fields stopped work.³⁶ Some stopped because the miners refused to travel to work on scab trains, others because of the absence of rolling stock to take away coal. In a few cases, the pretext for striking was trivial enough to indicate a keenness to join in the fight. At Pelaw Main, which was serviced by a private train line, the walkout came over the refusal of one of the train drivers to join the rail strike.³⁷ At Bulli, on the South Coast, the trigger was the fact that one of the lodge members was revealed to have travelled to work in a scab train.³⁸ The union acted officially only after the walkout. In the case of Bulli, which struck on 6 August, the Miners' Union executive instructed the lodge on 7 August to return, but was ignored.³⁹ On 9 August, meetings of the delegate board on the northern fields (Newcastle and Maitland) were convened to consider a strike that had already, for the most part, begun.⁴⁰ The delegates' board of the Maitland field passed a motion, moved by the union's secretary, Baddeley, that:

We, as an organisation, absolutely refuse to produce coal or handle it while our comrades the railway workers are fighting against the introduction of the obnoxious card system. We further pledge ourselves to do all in our power to help defeat the introduction of any system which would tend to degrade unionism and its objects; and we further declare all coal black.⁴¹

³⁵ *Sun*, 7 August 1917, p.5.

³⁶ There is uncertainty about these dates. For instance, the *Sun*, 8 August 1917, p.5, states that all the miners on the Newcastle, Maitland and Lithgow fields were out that day, whereas NSW Legislative Assembly, *The New South Wales Strike Crisis, 1917*, p.58, gives a range of dates from 8-10 August for the start of the strike in each colliery. Moreover, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 August 1917, p.8, confirms this latter source, stating that 27 out of 41 collieries on the Newcastle and Lithgow fields were idle and cites Baddeley, the secretary of the Miners' Union, as stating that the remainder would be idle 'tomorrow'.

³⁷ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 August 1917, p.10.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Daily Telegraph*, 8 August 1917, p.7.

⁴⁰ *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners' Advocate*, 9 August, p.5.

⁴¹ *Daily Telegraph*, 10 August 1917, p.5.

The strike in the coal mines had begun with walkouts by individual lodges, but was now official.

The railway strike slowly began to extend throughout the remaining country areas. The engineers at the Lismore workshop, for instance, finally decided to join on 8 August.⁴² The drivers, firemen and cleaners, and the permanent way staff followed suit the following day.⁴³ By 9 August, Commissioner Fraser admitted that out of a total railways staff of 28,167, 17,348 were on strike – 62 per cent. That day a public meeting of 2,000 in Bathurst affirmed their support for the strikers.⁴⁴ The main news, however, was of fresh battalions to join the fight. The wharfies and the seamen were beginning to stir.

The Wharf Labourers' and Coal Lumpers' Unions (the latter covering the workers who loaded coal onto ships) had both been admitted to the Defence Committee as early as 6 August.⁴⁵ On 7 August, the Coal Lumpers met and voted not to handle any coal brought by sea for use on the railways – though, as none arrived for some time, they were not immediately called on to implement this ban.⁴⁶ Then, on the evening 8 August, the Wharf Labourers' Union held its weekly meeting in Sussex Street. The meeting was crowded, and normal business was suspended as a discussion of the strike took place. A motion to leave the matter in the hands of the executive was amended to call for a mass meeting the following day – and this was carried by 'a large majority'.⁴⁷ Three thousand attended that stop work meeting and, in the words of a *Sun* reporter that afternoon,

Right from the start the members appeared to be enthusiastic for an immediate stoppage of work, and every time that the position of the strikers was referred to there was loud and prolonged cheering.⁴⁸

⁴² *Northern Star*, 9 August 1917, p.2.

⁴³ *Northern Star*, 10 August 1917, p.5.

⁴⁴ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 August 1917, p.7.

⁴⁵ *Sun*, 7 August 1917, p.5.

⁴⁶ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 August 1917, p.10; *Daily Telegraph*, 8 August 1917, p.7.

⁴⁷ *Daily Telegraph*, 9 August 1917, p.8; ANU, NBA, WWF Papers, Z248/Box 98, Minutes of Sydney Branch, 24 October 1917, reveals who was responsible for moving this motion. It cites the branch secretary, Timothy McCristal, as stating that 'he wished to do justice to a certain member Mr. McNeill who moved the amendment which had the effect of causing a stoppage of work and it was not fair to blame one member for what the majority had done'.

⁴⁸ *Sun*, 9 August 1917, p.5.

According to the *Sun*, the decision to strike was carried ‘almost unanimously’.⁴⁹ The *Sydney Morning Herald* was characteristically less inclined to present a picture of uniform enthusiasm for the strike:

The decision made by the wharf-labourers at the meeting at the Town Hall yesterday was arrived at mainly by the efforts of the ‘red ragers’ and the men who were working at Darling Island and Pyrmont wharfs served by the railway, but were put off on account of goods trains stopping. These men openly boasted yesterday that if they were unable to work, then the other section, or those employed on the Miller’s Point side of Darling Harbour and Woolloomooloo would also be idle. At yesterday’s meeting the Darling Island men predominated. What was more important, they secured all seating accommodation in the front part of the hall, and by their tumult prevented the more sober-minded men in the rear from hearing what the motion or discussion was about.⁵⁰

Whichever report is the more accurate regarding support for the strike at the mass meeting, there is no doubt about the strike that began the next morning. As the *Herald* was forced to report to its readers, the waterfront was ‘desolate’ (although the coal lumpers were still working) and: ‘At one of the wharfs the only sound that broke the stillness was an interstate boat, which was being loaded with coal [by the Coal Lumpers].’⁵¹

Once the wharfies were out, it was not long before the strike spread to the seamen. A Newcastle paper described the scene in Sydney:

There was a complete stoppage of work along the waterfront to-day [10 August] owing to the wharf labourers’ strike. The seamen are restive, and any attempt on the part of steamship owners to introduce free labour would bring them out immediately. It is not likely that the owners will try to utilise any other labour.⁵²

The possibility that they might be made to work with strikebreakers may have been part of the seamen’s motivation in striking, but it was not all. As the quote above implies, the owners in Sydney were in many cases willing not to load or unload their ships in order to keep the seamen at work, but their crews struck anyway. This was

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 August 1917, p.7.

⁵¹ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 August 1917, p.12.

⁵² *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners’ Advocate*, 11 August 1917, p.5.

the case, for instance, with the *Bombala*. The *Sun*, described in detail the story of this particular steamship going on strike:

A conference had been held during the morning between representatives of the wharf laborers, seamen, and trolley-men and draymen, at which it was agreed that...goods, providing they had been loaded before the wharf laborers' strike, could be unloaded. The seamen [on the *Bombala*], however, apparently took the matter into their own hands, and said that they would not allow anyone but members of the Wharf Laborers' Union to touch anything aboard the ship. The shipping companies accepted the seamen's ruling, and made no attempt to discharge the goods. They were prepared to leave these on board and run the risk of their going to waste, rather than precipitate trouble with another union.

BOMBALA FIREMEN REFUSE DUTY

It was confidently expected then that there would be no further trouble. However, the *Bombala*, which was the first of the Inter-state boats to leave, only got clear of the wharf when the firemen took action.⁵³

The reason why the firemen on the *Bombala* suddenly decided to refuse duty, after their steamer had already left the wharf, is revealed in the trial of two seamen for conspiracy later in August. Thomas Robinson, who was described simply as a seaman who 'has been in the country for only two years' and William Daly, who described himself as 'a native of Wales and a free thinker' and who was both a working seaman and the Vice President of the union's NSW branch, were very active on the day the *Bombala* struck. In the words of the police report, quoted at their trial:

It appears that Mr. Cooper, general secretary of the Seamen's Union, was engaged at Trades Hall, and a number of members headed by William Daly, insisted on having a meeting to deal with the strike question. Mr. Cooper gave way to them, and they, including Cooper, adjourned to the rooms in Clarence-street. Daly then took the chair, and passed a resolution calling all the members out. Most of the members present at this meeting were men who were not employed on any ships in Sydney Harbor. It had been explained to me that no strike could be passed by the union, except by the executive. It is pointed out that members of such executive reside in Brisbane, Melbourne, and Adelaide, as well as Sydney. Therefore the declaring of this strike is a gross violating [sic] of the union's regulations.⁵⁴

Robinson was delegated by the meeting to inform the ships in port that a strike was on, as the report of the trial in the *Sun* continues:

⁵³ *Sun*, 11 August 1917, p.5.

⁵⁴ *Sun*, 24 August 1917, p.5.

William Stone, gatekeeper at Howard Smith's wharf, testified to having refused to allow Robinson to go on the wharf on August 11. Witness afterward saw Robinson addressing a number of the Canberra men outside the gate...Captain Harry Tryer stated that he heard Robinson call out: 'On strike; come out!' The men he called out to then came on shore.⁵⁵

Another of the ships in port that Robinson called out was the *Indarra*. Its crew had decided to strike but were still on board when the outward bound *Bombala* passed by. As the *Sun*'s original report of the Bombala firemen's action described it:

The vessel [*Bombala*] was just about to pass the stern of the *Indarra* when the seamen on the outward-bound vessel were hailed from the *Indarra*. They notified the firemen of the message they had received from the *Indarra*, and the firemen came up on deck and notified the chief engineer that they could not keep up steam. The vessel went as far as Neutral Bay and there dropped anchor.⁵⁶

An irony of the walkout by the seamen in Sydney was the fact that a number of delegates from the Labor Council's Defence Committee were reportedly on board the *Indarra* and the *Canberra*, en route to inform interstate unionists of the strike – more evidence that the seamen's action was unexpected.⁵⁷

The attitude of Secretary Cooper towards his rebellious members after being press-ganged into the 'unconstitutional' mass meeting of 11 August is not entirely clear, but there are some clues. With regards to the meeting itself, Cooper quickly let the press know that he wasn't responsible for the strike decision, hence an article in the *Sun* on 13 August headed: 'HOW THE SEAMEN LEFT; UNION SECRETARY'S STATEMENT: Executive Advice Turned Down', in which Cooper is quoted as saying:

The executive advised the men to take no action until called upon by the Strike Committee; but the meeting unanimously voted that work should cease immediately, and appointed delegates to convey the resolution to the men on the ships in port.⁵⁸

The police report, cited above, makes great play of the allegation that none of the members at the meeting of 11 August was currently working on a ship. It also alleges

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ *Sun*, 11 August 1917, p.5.

⁵⁷ *Daily Telegraph*, 13 August 1917, p.5.

⁵⁸ *Sun*, 13 August 1917, p.5.

that the meeting was packed with IWW sympathisers – extremely unlikely given the current state of that organisation. Significantly, the policeman giving the report made it clear that he was relying heavily on an interview with Cooper. His comments regarding the meeting’s unrepresentative nature and unconstitutional status are likely to come from this source. We can only speculate whether Cooper shared, or indeed was the source of, the paranoia regarding the IWW. In any case, a *Sun* article makes the allegation regarding the unrepresentative nature of the meeting somewhat redundant when it mentions a follow up meeting on 13 August:

Mr. Cooper added that practically the whole of the members of the union in Sydney attended a meeting at the Trades Hall to-day and unanimously endorsed the decision to come out on Saturday.⁵⁹

The *Telegraph* report of the consequent decision of the Brisbane seamen to also walk out is curious in this regard. It states that:

At 10 o’clock this morning [13 August] all the sailors and firemen in Brisbane, who were members of the Federated Seamen’s Union, went out on strike in sympathy with the southern movement. The strikers were employed on coastal vessels and left the boats on arrival in Brisbane. It was explained by officials of the Seamen’s Union that the men came out at the instance of instructions from Sydney. There was no intention of men on transports coming out. Employees on Government steamers are so far unaffected. It is expected that watersiders and carters will be affected shortly.⁶⁰

Who issued the instructions? As the walkout occurred before the second, more representative mass meeting had occurred in Sydney, it is hard to imagine Cooper issuing any ‘instructions’. It is more likely then, that the ‘instructions’ referred to were merely some form of communication indicating that Sydney had struck.

On 12 August the 3,000 members of the Painters and Dockers’ Union voted unanimously to strike,⁶¹ and the 350 to 400 wharfies in Newcastle walked out.⁶² The members of the Painters and Dockers were mostly employed to clean, paint and repair ships at a variety of dockyards, some state-owned, some private. The *Herald* described their mass meeting in some detail:

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ *Daily Telegraph*, 14 August, p.5.

⁶¹ *Sun*, 13 August 1917, p.5.

⁶² *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners’ Advocate*, 13 August 1917, p.5.

It could easily be seen that the rowdier section had full possession of the front seats, as they were the last to leave. They trooped out, singing with great hilarity 'Solidarity for ever, for union makes us strong'. An official of the union, interviewed at the termination of the meeting, said that the motion to cease work had been carried almost unanimously, and that the membership in this state was about 2000. All the docks would be affected, including Garden, Cockatoo and Mort's Docks.⁶³

Then on Monday, 14 August, the strike, which had already spread north to include seamen in Queensland, spread to the Melbourne waterfront. The Melbourne wharfies initially struck that day over a separate industrial issue, however they voted that evening, at a 2,000 strong mass meeting, to drop their local dispute but remain on strike in support of the Sydney Wharf Labourers.⁶⁴ That night a meeting of the Melbourne Branch of the Seamen's Union voted not to strike, though as the *Age* reported:

It transpired, however, that the 'constitutionalists' had fought a keen battle with a section that was anxious to join issue with the Sydney and Brisbane seamen.⁶⁵

By 16 August, it was becoming clear that the union might have trouble keeping the seamen from striking, once scabs started unloading their ships.

In certain quarters yesterday it was hinted that if volunteer workers, other than wharf and shipping clerks, appear on the wharves all the seamen on Melbourne vessels would 'individually' decide to leave their ships as a protest against the use of 'black' labor. This attitude, however, is not supported by officials of the Seamen's Union.⁶⁶

The Melbourne seamen would never formally vote to strike. Instead they walked off, ship by ship, rather than work with the scabs who were brought in to unload them. By 21 August, most of the crews in Melbourne had walked.⁶⁷ With seamen out in Sydney, Brisbane and Melbourne, the east coast was paralysed.

⁶³ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 August 1917, p.7.

⁶⁴ *Age*, 14 August 1917, pp.5-6. The Melbourne Branch of the Waterside Workers' Federation also organised the labourers employed to unload wheat at railway sidings in various suburbs and these struck as well.

⁶⁵ *Age*, 15 August 1917, p.9.

⁶⁶ *Age*, 17 August 1917, p.8.

⁶⁷ *Age*, 22 August 1917, p.8; *Argus*, 22 August 1917, p.7.

Shipping was far more important to the Australian economy in 1917 than it is today. There were three distinct sectors within the industry, overseas shipping, interstate shipping and a coastal trade, which was particularly important in NSW and Queensland for obvious geographical reasons. The interstate shipping sector was most dramatically affected by the strike. There are many references, for instance, to Tasmania being cut off from the mainland. In August, the *Sun*, talked about the idea of using a ‘mosquito’ fleet to remedy this problem.⁶⁸ By September, the *Telegraph* described how:

Steamship services between Tasmanian ports and Sydney have been disorganised by the strike, and in order to assist in maintaining communication between Hobart and this port a fleet of small craft is being employed.⁶⁹

The *Telegraph* reported on 16 August that over 107,000 tons of shipping was held up: 58,864 in Sydney, 9,313 in Newcastle, 8,362 in Brisbane, and 31,063 in Melbourne⁷⁰. The next day the *Sun* revealed the extent to which the strike was confined to the interstate steamers; it reported a total of 124,133 tons held up, 119,133 of the total representing 38 ‘Inter-State’ vessels held up in Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Newcastle and Geelong.⁷¹

From these figures it would seem that overseas shipping (much of which, in any case, would have been handled by non-Australian ships) and the trade carried out by smaller coastal vessels was less affected. There are few references in the press to overseas vessels. An article, however, in the *Telegraph* of 21 August, opens up the fascinating possibility that some overseas crews may have joined the strike movement:

The first case arising out of the use of free labor on steamers during the present crisis was brought before Mr. Payten, S.M., at the Water Police Court yesterday, when eight seamen were charged with disobeying a lawful command on August 20. The majority of the accused were Swedes. Sergeant White asked for a remand. He said that the accused had refused to work alongside voluntary laborers who were assisting in the handling of cargo on an oversea vessel at present in port.⁷²

⁶⁸ *Sun*, 20 August 1917, p.5.

⁶⁹ *Daily Telegraph*, 15 September 1917, p.10.

⁷⁰ *Daily Telegraph*, 16 August 1917, p.6.

⁷¹ *Sun*, 17 August 1917, p.4.

⁷² *Daily Telegraph*, 21 August 1917, p.5.

The *Telegraph* also reported on 5 September that:

Joseph Madoljenok Mikkleson, 33, a Russian seaman, was charged before Mr. Payten S.M. at the Water Police Court yesterday, with using insulting language to Sabaldus Kilowsky in George Street, on September 2. It was stated by the latter, a volunteer worker, that accused had called him ‘A ----- “scab”’.⁷³

If Mikkleson was a seaman off a Russian ship, rather than simply an Australian seaman of Russian extraction, then this is doubly significant, both for the fact that he was a foreign seaman, and, given what was happening in Russia at this time, for the fact of his particular nationality.

In Sydney, the waterfront strike was strengthened by a decision of the Coal Lumpers to join the strike at a mass meeting on 14 August. This caused considerable outrage, as the Lumpers were responsible for coaling military transports. As the *Herald* noted:

All the members of the union are members of the [Naval Transport Coaling Battalion]...The president of the union, Mr. Jas. Conway is an honorary lieutenant, and the secretary, Mr. W. O’Connor, is an honorary sub-lieutenant of the coaling battalion.⁷⁴

Despite this they had failed to exempt military transports from the strike. If the following quote from an unnamed lumper, published by the *Telegraph*, is true, then this is an instance where ‘hatred of the Hun’ rebounded on the Government that had sponsored it:

We decided at first...that we would continue the work of the coaling battalion and coal the transports, but the question was then raised concerning the Government employing Germans and men we have ejected from the union on trawlers and in other shipping yards. The men then decided not to coal any transports till these Germans and ‘scabs’ have been put off.⁷⁵

The dockyards also saw an extension of the strike, as workers from other unions joined the painters and dockers: boilermakers, sheet metal workers, engineers and

⁷³ *Daily Telegraph*, 4 September 1917, p.6.

⁷⁴ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 August 1917, p.10.

⁷⁵ *Daily Telegraph*, 14 August 1917, p.5.

ironworkers at Garden and Cockatoo Islands, and boilermakers, blacksmiths, engineers, joiners, machinists, and the sailors' gang at Mort's Dock. The manager of Mort's Dock stated that 'I understand all the waterside engineering workshops are in the same position'.⁷⁶

As the strike built in early August, the enthusiasm and energy of the movement began to spill out on to the streets. There was a tradition of Sunday afternoon oratory in the Domain (and at the Yarra Bank in Melbourne) that, even in quieter times, drew hundreds, or even thousands each week.⁷⁷ Now, along with feeder processions, usually from Eddy Avenue or Redfern, they became daily events. As groups of workers joined the strike, they marched to the Domain to join the rallies and listen to the oratory. On Tuesday, 7 August, for instance:

A large meeting of tramwaymen and other strikers was held in the Domain...members of the Tramway Union who had assembled at Bowen's-buildings marching in procession to the park. At one time the crowd must have numbered over 6000.⁷⁸

The next day another 5,000 rallied, including a large number of women.⁷⁹ As the *Sun* described it:

With all the outward and visible signs of gala-day lightheartedness, Sydney's huge army of discontented workers marched through the principal thoroughfares to-day.⁸⁰

Nor were the crowds limited to the Domain and formal processions.

The three nerve centres of the strike are situated at the Trades Hall, Bowen's Buildings, and Daking House. Yesterday in the neighbourhood of those places men gathered in hundreds and thousands. A feature of the crowds was the presence of women and children. For the better part these were the wives and families of the men out. And they were not there trying to get their men back. They took their turn in the argument with the hottest of them, and when it came to calling 'Scab' at a passing tram driver, they were there with all vocal power. The scene at Goulburn Street was perhaps the most remarkable

⁷⁶ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 August 1917, p.10.

⁷⁷ See, for instance, NSA, 5/75/3, Chief Secretary's Office, Inward Correspondence, reports of Sergeant Thomas Robertson of meetings in the Domain indicate that there were 4-5,000 attending on 24 December 1916 (2,000 alone at the IWW meeting) and 4,000 on 7 January 1917.

⁷⁸ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 August 1917, p.10.

⁷⁹ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 August 1917, p.8.

⁸⁰ *Sun*, 9 August 1917, p.5.

of all. Such was the number of men congregated there that they ran over into George Street. There they stood in two rows about the kerbs. They talked little, in the sum total. Their function was to look and look hard. At each passing tram there was a concentrated gaze that – expressed in words – might have induced a breach of the peace.⁸¹

On 9 August a delegation of hundreds of strikers' wives converged on Parliament, where Acting-Premier Fuller, predictably, advised them to tell their husbands to return to work.⁸² The women returned to the more amenable environs of the Domain where a crowd, estimated even by the unsympathetic *Telegraph* as 20,000 strong, gathered, many of them singing 'Solidarity for Ever' as they waited for the speeches to start.⁸³

The *Herald* trumpeted that the rally on Friday, 10 August, was *only* 15,000.⁸⁴ This somewhat desperate triumph was short-lived. On Sunday, the numbers surged to a new high; the *Telegraph* admitted that 'over 100,000' filled the Domain.⁸⁵ The *Sun* particularly noted the presence of women:

Never in the Domain has there been such a large number of women at a Labor demonstration. They were there in tens during the conscription campaign, in hundreds during the political rallies when the Nationalists carried the polls. Yesterday they were present in their thousands and tens of thousands, and they had come many weary miles. Some had tramped all the way from Cook' River and brought their children with them.⁸⁶

The processions and rallies continued on a daily basis. On Friday, 17 August, a contingent of the young women from the Refreshment Rooms marched in carefully starched uniforms.⁸⁷ On Sundays the numbers remained high enough to baffle all attempts to establish an estimate, as the *Herald* revealed in its reportage of the rally of 19 August:

⁸¹ *Daily Telegraph*, 9 August 1917, p.6.

⁸² *Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 August 1917, p.8, records Fullers words as: 'The men who remain on strike will lose their seniority as well as their other rights and privileges...Go out and tell them that tomorrow morning is their last opportunity.'

⁸³ *Daily Telegraph*, 10 August 1917, p.5.

⁸⁴ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 August 1917, p.12; *Daily Telegraph*, 11 August 1917, p.5, noticed that some of the strikers removed their hats (as if in the presence of a hearse) whenever a scab-driven tram passed.

⁸⁵ *Daily Telegraph*, 13 August 1917, p.6.

⁸⁶ *Sun*, 13 August 1917, p.5.

⁸⁷ *Daily Telegraph*, 18 August 1917, p.9.

There have been many large gatherings in Sydney's Domain in recent years, but yesterday's assemblage eclipsed them all in point of numbers. Some judges estimated 80,000, others 100,000, and not a few went so far as to say that 150,000 were present at one time or another during the afternoon.⁸⁸

As the strike spread beyond Sydney, rallies and processions began to occur in locations other than the traditional city locales. Newcastle's Islington Park became a regular centre for rallies that grew from around 1,000⁸⁹ to 4,000 by the end of August.⁹⁰ There were rallies in Bathurst (where 2,000 'affirmed their support for the strikers' on 9 August⁹¹), in Mudgee⁹², and regular meetings and demonstrations in the Parramatta area, many of them addressed by the local state Labor M.P., Jack Lang.⁹³

In Melbourne the strike provided extra focus for street agitation that was already underway. The Melbourne left, while generally smaller than its Sydney counterpart (the IWW in particular was relatively insignificant in Victoria), had a robust tradition of street protest, dating back to the foundation of the Victorian Socialist Party (VSP) in the first decade of the century by Tom Mann.⁹⁴ The VSP, in decline before the war, had been galvanised by the anti-conscription battles of 1916.⁹⁵ In early 1917 it recruited Adela Pankhurst, the youngest daughter of that famous family, who had previously been involved with Vida Goldstein's Women's Political Association (WPA) and with the associated Women's Peace Army. Pankhurst joined the VSP because she felt that class rather than gender was the more important division in society.⁹⁶ Given the trajectory of the WPA later that year, she perhaps need not have resigned. The WPA had already distinguished itself from the normal run of middle class feminist organisations by opposing the war. It regularly allowed unions to hold meetings in its headquarters at Guild Hall in Swanston Street. Later the same

⁸⁸ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 August 1917, p.8.

⁸⁹ *Daily Telegraph*, 10 August 1917, p.5.

⁹⁰ *Daily Telegraph*, 27 August 1917, p.6.

⁹¹ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 August 1917, p.7.

⁹² *Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 August 1917, p.8, gives no numbers, simply referring to the meeting as 'large'.

⁹³ *Cumberland Times*, 16 August 1917, mentions a 'march from Granville to the *Times* office' the previous day, a meeting in Parramatta that night and a plan for a march from Auburn to Parramatta the following Saturday. This local Labor paper was pro-strike and almost embarrassingly effusive in its praise for Jack Lang, with whom its editor is clearly closely associated. See, for instance, *Cumberland Times*, 20 August 1917, p. 1, where a report of Lang addressing strikers at Auburn Park stated 'he is the man of the hour'.

⁹⁴ See Geoffrey Charles Hewitt, *A History of the Victorian Socialist Party, 1906-1932*, Unpublished MA Thesis, Latrobe University, 1974, pp.31-85, for an account of the early history of the VSP.

⁹⁵ Farrell, *International Socialism & Australian Labour*, pp.11-27. The VSP had around five hundred members by 1917.

⁹⁶ Bomford, *That Dangerous and Persuasive Woman*, p.170.

building was turned into a food cooperative to aid the strikers (particularly the wharfies and their families who were even treated to a free cinema on the premises). By February 1918, the WPA had supplied 60,000 food parcels, prepared 30,000 meals, provided 6,500 haircuts, distributed 30,000 items of clothing and repaired 2,000 boots.⁹⁷ The funds were solicited from the Association's middle class members, from suburban Political Labor Councils, and from workplaces not on strike.⁹⁸

Worthy though it was, strike support was not sufficient for Adela Pankhurst, who preferred, along with Jenny Baines and a number of other socialist women, to engage in agitation around the rising cost of living. On 2 August she had led 200 women in a noisy demonstration at the Federal Parliament (then located in what is now the State Parliament in Melbourne).⁹⁹ The protest was small but disruptive. According to one report, as the women surged into the foyer of Parliament:

The member for Melbourne (Dr. Maloney) appeared on the scene, and was immediately swallowed up in the crowd...there was a sudden break in the crowd, and led by a few excited women, all those present surged through a door on the northern side of the entrance lobby, which is marked 'Members Only'. Thence they rushed in a shouting gesticulating mob to the doors of the Chamber. The banging on the doors interrupted the proceedings in the House. Mr. Gregory, who was speaking on the Railways Bill, stopped, and every available messenger and officer hurried to the door to stave off the threatened invasion of the chamber.¹⁰⁰

This protest was an attempt by Pankhurst to turn a propaganda campaign she had been engaging in for most of the year into agitation. The *Socialist*, the VSP's official organ, boasted that Pankhurst's speeches regarding the cost of living had already been responsible for the wharfies banning wheat exports (they did so in protest at the high cost of food).¹⁰¹ On 2 August, the small numbers involved reveal that this was a stunt mainly involving female members of the VSP. By late September, however,

⁹⁷ *Woman Voter*, 20 September 1917, p.1, describing this operation, anticipated the fashionable terminology of the 1960s: 'The Guild Hall – twelve months since, the home of true democracy – now a commune.'

⁹⁸ *Woman Voter*, 25 October 1917, p.2, describes how a van supplied by a sympathetic driver from Carlton & United Breweries delivered tons of food donated by the workers at Newport Railway Yard to the Guild Hall. A 'moving picture' was made of the event and screened to an audience of strikers the following weekend.

⁹⁹ *Age*, 3 August, p.5.

¹⁰⁰ *Barrier Miner*, 6 August 1917, p.4.

¹⁰¹ *Socialist*, 7 September 1917, p.4.

thousands were involved in street agitation, and the strike movement appears to have been the catalyst for this change.

Throughout August there were demonstrations on a nearly daily basis as hundreds gathered in Treasury Gardens, Exhibition Gardens, and the Yarra Bank to listen to Pankhurst and Baines¹⁰² and then proceeded, as the ever vigilant Constable Proudfoot expressed it in one of his reports, ‘to walk around the town’.¹⁰³ As more and more Victorian workers joined the strike, the numbers attending meetings at the Yarra Bank, which, like the Domain in Sydney, functioned as Melbourne’s traditional place to meet and talk, grew to several thousand. There were also regular rallies, with numbers approaching 1,000, in the Yarraville Gardens in the inner west.¹⁰⁴ On 29 August, 6,000 strikers rallied at the Yarra Bank and were addressed by Vida Goldstein and Cecilia John from the WPA, both from atop a car draped with a banner reading ‘Workers of the World Unite’. Pankhurst then persuaded the crowd to ‘roll up’ to Federal Parliament. It duly followed her to the intersection of Flinders and Swanston Streets where an attempt by mounted police to disperse it was repelled. The demonstration was blocked from reaching Parliament by a solid barrier of police. The police also protected the shopping and business precincts of Collins Street by corralling the demonstration entirely within Swanston Street.¹⁰⁵ It nevertheless swelled (according to the *Argus*) to 20,000 as it proceeded along Collins and Bourke where, according to the *Age*:

The crowd had worked itself into a frenzy and shouts of ‘Mob Rule’ could be heard above the shrieks of women and the hoots of senseless young men.¹⁰⁶

Behind the police lines that protected them from Adela Pankhurst and her rampaging throng, the members of Federal Parliament discussed the apparently fearful rumour

¹⁰² VPRS, Victoria Police Inwards correspondence, 807/P0000/624, Police Reports, August 1917.

¹⁰³ Ibid, report of Constable Proudfoot, 24 August 1917.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, report of Sergeant McCormack, 8 September 1917, describes one rally as having 750 participants. McCormack’s report of 7 September provides an insight into why Yarraville had such a large local meeting. He lists strikes in that suburb at the following firms: ‘Cummins Smith’s Phosphate Co., Miller’s Rope Works, CSR, [Mischer’s?] Phosphate Works & Mount Lyall Chemical Works.’

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, report of Constable Frederick Tucker, 29 August 1917: ‘At about 4.15 pm on the 29th day of August 1917 I was on duty in Swanston-street Melbourne. At that time Mrs Clarke and a number of other persons who were marching along Swanston-street endeavoured to go in a westerly direction along Collins-street but they were blocked from doing so by the police on duty. They then continued along the west side of Swanston-street.’

¹⁰⁶ *Age*, 30 August, p.7; *Argus* 30 August 1917, p.8. The description of the demonstration here is constructed from both reports, though the quote, of course, is from the *Age*.

that another dangerous agitator, the great Irish syndicalist, and leader of the 1913 Dublin lockout, James Larkin, was *en route* to NSW. Hughes reassured the anxious members that Larkin would not be allowed to land.¹⁰⁷ The following day Pankhurst led another crowd of 10,000 from the Yarra Bank in a similar attempt to reach the Federal Parliament.¹⁰⁸

The second and third weeks of the strike saw a continuing extension of the strike to railway workers in more distant parts of NSW, such as Dubbo and Albury – both of which struck on 13 August.¹⁰⁹ It also included new sections such as the Permanent Way employees at Bathurst, who struck on 14 August¹¹⁰ and fettlers throughout the state (also on 14th).¹¹¹ The strike on the waterfront began to affect the carters and storemen who worked with produce from the wharves. The carters, members of the Trolley and Draymen's Union, voted to ban 'black' goods on 14 August, and while a meeting of the Storemen and Packers' Union voted on the same day 'to take no drastic action', by 19 August, they to began to walk out rather than handle 'black' goods.

The wholesale grocery trade was disorganised to-day, merchants being unable to get goods to the country, owing to the refusal of the trolley and draymen to cart to the railway stations, and to the storemen and packers threatening to stop work if voluntary labor was used. At D. Mitchell and Company's stores in Kent-street 50 men ceased work, alleging that certain goods that were to be loaded were intended for use of the country volunteers at the Sydney Cricket Ground.¹¹²

The decision of the carters to extend their bans, from the wharves to the railways, was a dramatic extension of their strike:

The business of Sussex-street, the greatest food-distributing centre in the city, has been practically declared black. That is to say, the Trolley and Draymen's Union, at a largely attended meeting, has refused to handle foodstuffs arriving

¹⁰⁷ *Age*, 30 August, p.7.

¹⁰⁸ *Argus*, 31 August 1917, p.5.

¹⁰⁹ *Sun*, 14 August 1917, p.7, states that Albury came out after holding a ballot. *Telegraph*, 14 August 1917, p.6: 'On Sunday [12 August] a mass meeting of railway employees of all branches was held in the Oddfellows' Hall, Dubbo, after which the stationmaster was informed that the men did not intend to report for duty this morning. The loco men, with the exception of a couple, were already out. The effect of Sunday's decision was that the traffic employees, with the exception of three guards, one porter, and two junior porters, handed in their uniforms and equipment.'

¹¹⁰ *Daily Telegraph*, 15 August 1917, p.6.

¹¹¹ *Sun*, 15 August 1917, p.5.

¹¹² *Sun*, 20 August 1917, p.5.

either by rail or steamer. Almost from the commencement of the upheaval, the union had placed an embargo on foodstuffs to and from the wharfs; but its latest decision places an embargo also on foodstuffs arriving at or being despatched from the railways.¹¹³

The shortage of cattle at the Homebush state abattoirs had led to a small number of slaughtermen being stood down. The workers at Homebush, and at the private yard at Glebe Island, walked out in protest at this on 16 August.¹¹⁴ The Government now had a meatworkers strike to deal with.

All these developments were overshadowed, however, by the reaction to the arrest of three union leaders for conspiracy on Saturday, 18 August. Willis of the coalminers, Thompson of the ARTSA and Kavanagh were all charged with having 'instigated' the strike.¹¹⁵ The arrest of Willis led to an almost immediate strike by his members at the State Coal Mine in Wonthaggi in Victoria on 20 August.¹¹⁶ Willis, as the President of the Australasian Coal and Shale Employees Federation (ACSEF), was (at least in theory) the leader of the Broken Hill miners as well as the coal miners, as the AMA had recently affiliated to the ACSEF. The mines at Broken Hill were already in danger of closing due to a lack of coal.¹¹⁷ Now there was no need to wait for the coal to run out, the arrest of Willis had provided an excuse the militants on the Barrier to join the strike. The members of the AMA had already planned to meet on Sunday 19 August 'to discuss the adviseableness [sic] of falling into line with the men on strike in Sydney, or assisting them financially.'¹¹⁸ The news of the arrests had just been telegraphed to the office of the *Barrier Daily Truth*, the town's main Labor daily, and was read out to the mass meeting, which packed the quadrangle of the

¹¹³ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 August 1917, p.8.

¹¹⁴ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 17 August 1917, p.8: 'It was stated by various union officials at the Trades Hall yesterday that the strike had extended to the Homebush sale yards and to Glebe Island. It was pointed out that as a result of the shortage of supplies at Homebush three old hands were put off. Subsequently other employees at the yards ceased work as a protest, pending the result of a deputation, which it resolved should wait upon the Meat Board... Officials of the union then proceeded to Homebush and advised the employees to continue working, but they refused to do so. The officials also stated that the slaughtermen and basil workers at Glebe Island had ceased work. It was considered however that a stoppage at Glebe Island would have occurred automatically, for with no supplies coming from Homebush the men at the abattoirs would be rendered idle.'

¹¹⁵ *Daily Telegraph*, 23 August 1917, p.4.

¹¹⁶ *Age*, 21 August 1917, p.5; *Argus*, 21 August 1917, p.5.

¹¹⁷ *Barrier Daily Truth*, 18 August, p.3, cited E. J. Horwood, president of the Broken Hill Mining Managers' Association, as stating that: 'As the stocks of coal held by practically all of the companies will soon have been reduced to the lowest limit that the requirements for pumping and maintenance of the mines when stopped demand, all the companies will have no option but to close down their works in from 10 to 14 days unless further supplies of coal become available in the meantime.'

¹¹⁸ *Barrier Daily Truth*, 20 August 1917, p.2.

Trades Hall. Not surprisingly, when the vote was put to strike from midnight that night, ‘only 19 hands raised in opposition’.¹¹⁹ The *Barrier Miner* reported the enthusiastic scene the following morning:

A large crowd of men congregated in front of Trades Hall this morning, and after singing several songs, adjourned to the Trades Hall quadrangle, where further songs were sung. Members were unable to gain admission, and remained outside singing. Owing to the quadrangle not being large enough to accommodate the crowd, the meeting decided to adjourn to the Skating Rink. A procession of men, which when in progress extended from Sulphide-street to Oxide-street, then marched to Argent-street to the Skating Rink, where a meeting was held. It was afterwards stated unofficially that the meeting decided that the mines would not be picketed, but that the men should visit the mines and ask anyone who was working to pull out.¹²⁰

The following morning, 20 August, the 3,648 underground miners organised by the Amalgamated Miners’ Association (AMA) were on strike. The members of the various craft unions that organised the surface workers, and who had refused to join in the 1916 strike, remained at work for the moment, but called meetings for that evening to consider the situation.¹²¹

The result of these meetings was a decision to strike.¹²² In contrast to the 1916 strike, the AMA was joined by the other unions in the town – a conference on 21 August voting to exempt only salaried officials, employees of the government’s waterworks, theatrical employees, and tailors and tailoresses from joining the strike. All unionists handling foodstuffs were exempt, unless delivering them to the line of lode.¹²³ *The Barrier Daily Truth* headlined its report of this unanimity ‘GLORIOUS SOLIDARITY ON THE BARRIER’.¹²⁴ The Trades and Labour Council, formed as a right wing opposition to the AMA during the 1916 strike, recommended: ‘That this council recommends that all unionists affiliated with this council cease work in sympathy with the men now on strike’.¹²⁵ As a result, the underground miners were united at last by the craft unions on the surface and two delegates, J.J. Flynn and J.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ *Barrier Miner*, 20 August 1917, p.2.

¹²¹ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 August p.7; *Barrier Miner*, 20 August 1917, p.2, gives the figures of 3,956 on the surface and 3,648 underground.

¹²² *Barrier Miner*, 21 August 1917, p.3: ‘The strike decided on by the A.M.A. on Sunday afternoon... was extended by the decision of several other unions last night to join with the A.M.A. and cease work to-day.’; *Barrier Daily Truth*, 21 August 1917, p.3, stated that the decision was unanimous.

¹²³ *Barrier Miner*, 21 August 1917, p.3.

¹²⁴ *Barrier Daily Truth*, 21 August 1917, p.3.

¹²⁵ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 August, p.10.

Middling, were sent to Port Pirie in an attempt to persuade the workers in the smelter to make the strike complete.¹²⁶ In addition, a number of industrial concerns were also closed down in Broken Hill, including the Globe Timber Works¹²⁷, the local brickworks, the R.J. Hooper and Company's foundry and the Crystal Foundry.¹²⁸

The government made no effort to send scabs to Broken Hill, but they did acquire the services of a contingent of one hundred South Australian police in order to 'maintain order' in the town. The police arrived on 23 August and marched in formation from the railway station to the police station. The streets were full of striking men gathered together in groups at various locations, and these began to follow the police, eventually coalescing into an angry demonstration of around four hundred. According to the *Barrier Miner*:

A rush was at once made by between 300 and 400 men down Sulphide-street and round the corner into Argent-street, and the visiting contingent of police was met near Bromide-street by an ever-increasing crowd. There were cries of 'croweaters!' 'scabs,' and 'stop 'em,' but the police marched on. As they passed through the crowd they were loudly hooted, but there was no attempt to stop them. The police marched down the left hand side of the street, and the crowd, comprising mostly of young men, marched alongside in scattered order across the remaining portion of the road. Just after Sulphide-street was crossed and as the police were marching abreast of the Courthouse, the cry was raised, 'Here come the "wobblies,"' and a procession of a few score men, marching from the direction of Chloride-street was seen approaching, singing 'Solidarity' as they marched...Some of the crowd picked out two plainclothes constables, and commenced hooting them. They followed the constables to the Police Station, where the plainclothes men went inside.¹²⁹

The *Telegraph* described what happened next:

The crowd attempted to follow, but the way was barred by several policemen who were standing on the footpath. Some members of the crowd rushed at Constables Wright and McFarlane, who had a man under arrest. Near the police station fence the police were jostled and pushed. In the disturbance the constables drew their batons and hit out. The crowd was reinforced, and another collision occurred with the police. The constables again drew their batons. Then from out of the police station came the South Australian police, and, with other local officers, at once charged with batons drawn, and soon dispersed the crowd. One section of the crowd went in a northerly direction,

¹²⁶ *Barrier Miner*, 23 August 1917, p.1.

¹²⁷ *Barrier Daily Truth*, 21 August 1917, p.3.

¹²⁸ *Barrier Miner*, 21 August 1917, p.3.

¹²⁹ *Barrier Miner*, 23 August 1917, p.3.

while the remainder ran towards Sulphide Street. Here a shout was raised. As some of the men pulled down a portion of a picket fence surrounding the Court-house some of the constables rushed to the scene, ran in amongst the crowd, and about six men were quickly arrested.¹³⁰

According to the pro-union Broken Hill paper, the *Barrier Daily Truth*, some of the police drew revolvers as well as batons.¹³¹

In the immediate aftermath of the affray, knots of men remained on the streets of Broken Hill. George Kerr, the president of the AMA, toured the streets and called the men: 'Fellow-workers. Come down to Trades Hall, and we will have a meeting in the quadrangle.'¹³² After some initial reluctance, they followed him. Frustration at their failure to storm the police station appears to have overflowed at this meeting. There were no scabs working on the line of lode. However, engineering staff were operating the pumps in order to maintain the condition of the mines – something that had always been allowed by the union in the past. In the run up to the confrontation with the police, the miners had shown a keen determination to stamp firmly on even the hint of scabbing taking place. As the *Barrier Daily Truth* recorded on 22 August:

This morning, word was received by the crowd that a person had gone in at Block 14. The crowd started off to interview him. And before it had got there it numbered thousands. A bag of carpenter's tools, apparently discarded in haste, was found beside a puddle. The proprietor was missing.¹³³

Having thus had a whiff of scabbing, the crowd decided to ensure that the staff were not employed on any work normally performed by strikers:

Intimation was received at the Trades Hall to-day that the staff was employed in the power house and on the boiler at the North mine. A detachment of strikers, nearly 300 strong, accordingly marched to the mine after lunch to investigate. The staff was so engaged but the manager (Mr. Bradford) explained that the intention was to keep the mine from flooding, but in response to the representations of the strikers he agreed to withdraw the staff from that work.¹³⁴

The meeting held after the confrontation with the South Australian police voted to immediately launch a mass inspection of the mines. As the miners filed out,

¹³⁰ *Daily Telegraph*, 24 August 1917, p.4.

¹³¹ *Barrier Daily Truth*, 23 August 1917, p.3.

¹³² *Barrier Miner*, 23 August 1917, p.3.

¹³³ *Barrier Daily Truth*, 22 August 1917, p.4

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

according to the *Daily Truth*, ‘Women and children were among the reinforcements, and the total strength of the invaders numbered, perhaps, two thousand.’¹³⁵ The paper then carried a vivid and detailed account of what followed.

It was resolved to march. The route was along Argent Street to Garnet Street, and across Block 10. While traversing Block 10, a body of police was seen making its way along the railway line. ‘Let us give them a run,’ was the cry, and the marchers set out at the double. This was continued till the police were seen streaking [sic] behind a dump in the direction of the South Mine. The head of the procession was instructed to keep right on, for the amusement of the constabulary. The rear was ordered to turn around for the Proprietary.¹³⁶

In charge of the invasion was George Kerr, who soon found himself face to face with the Manager of the Proprietary, Mr. Horwood:

Mr. Horwood accosted Mr. Kerr, asking him where he was going. Mr. Kerr replied, ‘Just for a walk, to see that there are no scabs about.’ ‘Then go back the way you came,’ said the manager. Mr. Kerr laughed at him. ‘You’re very brave,’ sneered the manager. Mr. Kerr replied, ‘As brave as you were in the Arbitration Court’...It was discovered that the boiler was being worked by the third engineer. Mr. Horwood claimed that the official was exempt, but it was pointed out that he was doing the work of the F.E.D. and F.A. men. ‘Then let the F.E.D. and F.A. men protest,’ said the manager. Thereupon two members of the F.E.D. and F.A. made their way forward, and demanded that the man come out. The manager said, ‘He is not going out.’ Someone responded, ‘You are not running the show, Horwood. You’ll go off yourself if you’re not civil.’ A number of police came on the scene and pressed to the centre of the discussion. They were incapable of being better than spectators...During this discussion the fires were drawn. When the word had been brought back that this had been done, the third engineer was asked several times, point blank, whether he would come out. Each time he refused, stating that the company was his employer. He was conducted off at the head of the procession, which returned by the Bromide Street route. He was marched along Argent Street to the motor stand opposite the Freemason’s Hotel, and thence taken home in a car. Some wanted to dip him in the dam, but Mr. Kerr quietened these spirits.¹³⁷

According to Ern Wetherall’s memoirs, one of the reasons for the decision of Kerr to bundle the unfortunate engineer, whose name was Erson James Shevill¹³⁸, into a car

¹³⁵ *Barrier Daily Truth*, 23 August 1917, p.3.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

¹³⁸ *Barrier Miner*, 30 August 1917, p.1.

and rush him to safety was to rescue him from the threat of violence, and it was the women in the crowd who were most intent on this.¹³⁹

Having failed to dislodge the Adelaide police by force, the Barrier unions resolved to attempt to do so by industrial means. They began with the employees of the hotels where the offending police were lodged.¹⁴⁰ Then the butchers and nightsoil collectors declared the police black.¹⁴¹ The latter ban proved to be most offensive, and effective, leading to the withdrawal of the South Australian police.¹⁴² General Stink prevailed where General Riot had failed.

The Broken Hill miners were the last of the big battalions to join the strike, but the operation of the 'black doctrine' continued to add to the ranks of the strikers. On 22 August, the five hundred employees of the Lithgow Ironworks walked out.¹⁴³ Three hundred employees at the Colonial Sugar Refinery (CSR) factory in Pyrmont in Sydney struck on 20 August:

In consequence of the strike of wharf laborers and the introduction of free labor at the company's wharf last week, employees of the company refused to handle sugar unloaded by the latter.¹⁴⁴

The carters employed by CSR joined; all up, by 22 August, there were five hundred on strike.¹⁴⁵ A similar chain of events occurred at the company's Melbourne plant. On Friday 17 August, the workers at the CSR factory in Yarraville found a notice pinned to the factory gates stating that, unless they agreed to unload the raw sugar from the *Kadina* (which had been stranded at the factory's wharf on the Yarra by the wharfies' strike), the factory would close down within a week.¹⁴⁶ A meeting of the

¹³⁹ Wetherall, *Industrial History of the Stormy Years*.

¹⁴⁰ *Sun*, 24 August 1917, p.5: 'Following upon the recommendation of the Strike Defence Committee that unionists would not render the police any social service, a meeting of the Hotel, Club, and Restaurant Employees' Union was convened at which all members from the several leading hotels at which Adelaide constables were lodged were present. All these places were immediately deserted by their staffs, rendering it necessary for the women of the households, with their friends, to take on the work of cooks, kitchenmaids, waitresses, and housemaids, as best they could.'

¹⁴¹ *Age*, 28 August 1917, p.5.

¹⁴² *Barrier Miner*, 28 August 1917, p.2, recorded that some of the police returned 'last night' and that the rest would return 'tonight'.

¹⁴³ *Barrier Miner* 23 August 1917, p.2.

¹⁴⁴ *Daily Telegraph*, 21 August 1917, p.6.

¹⁴⁵ *Daily Telegraph*, 23 August 1917, p.5.

¹⁴⁶ *Age*, 18 August 1917, p.11.

Sugar Workers' Union on 19 August voted not to unload the *Kadina*.¹⁴⁷ By 24 August the manager of the Yarraville factory was writing to his head office in Sydney complaining of the '150 men outside the gates waiting for those who have been at work today'.¹⁴⁸ Faced with the choice of scabbing or being laid off, they had chosen to strike.

In Melbourne, on 21 August, two hundred members of the Artificial Manure Trades Union walked out at the Mount Lyell Co. in Yarraville rather than handle a 'black' cargo of superphosphate.¹⁴⁹ By the next day, five hundred members of the union were out.¹⁵⁰ The officials of the Melbourne Trolley and Draymen's Union, who had opposed taking industrial action, were forced by pressure from the militants within their union to call a meeting on Sunday 26 August. The militants won the vote to officially ban handling 'black' goods. Not all carters obeyed this directive, but it had the effect of increasing the number on strike.¹⁵¹ On the morning of Saturday 25 August, 1,000 timber workers at Melbourne's three largest timber yards walked out rather than accept deliveries of 'black' timber. By Monday, fifteen of Melbourne's timber yards were shut. While the remaining fifty-four remained open, they were mostly tiny operations, and Melbourne's building trade was in danger of closing down as a result.¹⁵² On Friday 31 August, a handful of carters and (for the first time) storemen joined the strike in Melbourne.¹⁵³ Around four hundred rope and cordage workers at James Millar Pty. Ltd. in Yarraville joined rather than process a delivery of New Zealand hemp handled from the port to the factory gate by scabs.¹⁵⁴ They were joined by the workers at Kinnear's ropeworks in Footscray.¹⁵⁵ On Sunday 2 September, 1,200 carters rallied at Guild Hall and the Storeman and Packers met,

¹⁴⁷ University of Melbourne Archives (UMA), Sugar Works Employees' Union of Australia papers, 1 / 2, Minutes, 21 August 1917. The meeting was held at the Masonic Hall in Newport. See also *Argus*, 20 August 1917, p.7 and *Age*, 20 August 1917, p.7.

¹⁴⁸ ANU, NBA, CSR papers, 142/204, Letter from CSR Yarraville to Head Office (Sydney), 24 August 1917.

¹⁴⁹ *Argus*, 23 August 1917, p.5.

¹⁵⁰ *Argus*, 24 August 1917, p.7.

¹⁵¹ *Age*, 25 August 1917, p.11 & 27 August 1917, p.7; *Argus*, 27 August 1917, p.5.

¹⁵² *Age*, 27 August 1917, p.7; *Argus*, 27 August 1917, p.5.

¹⁵³ *Argus*, 31 August 1917, p.5.

¹⁵⁴ *Age*, 1 September 1917, p.13; *Argus*, 1 September 1917, p.19.

¹⁵⁵ VPRS, Victoria Police Inwards Correspondence, 807/P0000/624, Report of Sergeant J.S. Mackay, 7 September 1917: 'This day at 11am, Mr Edward Kinnear of Kinnear Bros rope works Footscray West, (whose employees have been out on strike during the past week) had an interview with me and stated that he was informed that a mass meeting of his employees, also those of Millar Bros Ropeworks Yarraville & representatives from Trades Hall would be held at 3pm near his works.'

voting officially to ban the handling of ‘black’ goods.¹⁵⁶ Back in Sydney, on 27 August, eighty members of the Liquor Trades Union at the Schweppes factory in Surrey Hills struck in protest at their employer’s refusal to cease supplying cordial to the railway refreshment rooms.¹⁵⁷

In Melbourne, the first week of September saw the last significant additions to the ranks of strikers. On 5 September, 1,250 workers at Dunlop’s Montague factory in Melbourne (‘1,000 men and 250 females’) went on strike rather than deal with a shipment of raw rubber unloaded and shipped by scabs from the waterfront.¹⁵⁸ Small parcels (the total by now numbering in the low hundreds) of storemen joined the strike during the week, as did ‘80 men and boys and 40 girls [who] were dismissed at the soap works of Kitchen and Sons in Port Melbourne for refusing to load carts driven by non-union drivers’.¹⁵⁹ The rest of the three hundred employees at Kitchen & Sons went out the next day in protest, along with another three hundred other members of their union, the Manufacturing Grocers’, at two similar companies, Parsons Bros. and Lewis and Whitty.¹⁶⁰ In addition to these, another factory in the trade, McKenzie’s, was out while another, Prowlings, was only kept at work by the intervention of the Secretary of the union, no doubt shocked to see the overwhelming majority of his tiny union’s 972 Victorian members out on strike.¹⁶¹ It was to be the last substantial addition to the strike in Victoria.

In Sydney, the last acts in the drama of the strike’s explosive spread occurred in the week before it was called off by the Defence Committee. On Monday, 3 September, the workers at the Mortlake and Kent Street works of the Australian Gaslight Factory struck rather than handle ‘black’ coal. The reason for their late entry to the ranks of strikers was simply that their employers had not had to replenish coal stocks until now.¹⁶² On Tuesday 4 September, the bottlemakers at the Australian Glass Manufacturers’ factory in Waterloo also struck rather than handle scab coal and the timberworkers at Messrs. George Hudson and Son at Glebe struck rather than

¹⁵⁶ *Age*, 3 September 1917, p.5; *Argus*, 3 September 1917, p.5.

¹⁵⁷ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 August 1917, p.10.

¹⁵⁸ *Age*, 6 September 1917, p.8; *Argus*, 6 September 1917, p.5.

¹⁵⁹ *Age*, 6 September 1917, p.8; *Argus*, 6 September 1917, p.5.

¹⁶⁰ *Age*, 7 September 1917, p.5.

¹⁶¹ UMA, Manufacturing Grocers’ Employees Federation of Australia, Vic. Branch, papers, 1/1/4, Minutes, 11 September 1917: ‘The Secretary also reported that the members at Prowlings desired to cease work owing to being asked to handle black goods but he had attended the factory and had informed them that in accordance with the policy of the Defence Committee that no more unionists should cease work...’

¹⁶² *Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 September 1917, p.7.

handle material delivered from wharves.¹⁶³ On 6 September, 120 timberworkers at McKenzie's timberyard in Glebe struck for the same reason.¹⁶⁴ On 7 September, 30 labourers at the Co-Operative Box factory Balmain refused to use black timber to continue making biscuit boxes to send to the front and walked out.¹⁶⁵ That weekend the Defence Committee settled on terms that were in effect a capitulation. The strike was officially over, but it would take weeks for it to actually end.

¹⁶³ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 5 September 1917, p.9.

¹⁶⁴ *Sun*, 7 September 1917, p.5.

¹⁶⁵ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 September 1917, p.11.

Chapter Four: 'We have been sold!'

The abrupt ending of the railway strike on 9 September 1917 came as a shock to many of the strikers. They reacted with anger, bewilderment and not a small measure of defiance to what they considered to be a betrayal by the Defence Committee. It would take a full two weeks before the last recalcitrant strikers signed the despised application forms, agreeing thereby to return at the discretion of the Railway Commissioners. This Chapter describes the collapse of the strike movement in the weeks that followed that return. For many groups outside the railways, particularly the coal miners and wharfies, it was a bitter experience. They had struck in support of the railway workers, now they were abandoned – left to deal with a strike that increasingly appeared (with scabs filling their places and an increasing employer intransigence) like a lockout. The upward surge of the strike in August had accentuated the positive features of the labour movement, most particularly the positive principle of solidarity. The unravelling after the return on the railways led, by contrast, to division and recrimination. In the Seamen's Union, especially, it was to expose a growing chasm between the officials and the rank and file.

In retrospect, the strike movement, for all its inspiring features, was shown to have been lacking in several key areas. The strike on the railways had never been solid and there was no strategy proposed or attempted to deal with the failure of a substantial section of the railways and tramways to join the strike. On the waterfront, the strikers found themselves replaced immediately by scabs – the victims of a patriotic mobilisation of the middle class and sections of the rural population. Again there was no strategy to deal with the scabbing, merely an attempt to downplay its significance. The officials, who for the most part had not wanted to strike, had no idea how to win. It is little wonder that, at the first opportunity, they sounded an ignominious retreat.

The *Sydney Morning Herald* evocatively recorded the reaction of a crowd outside Trades Hall to the decision to end the strike on the railways:

A huge crowd of men assembled shortly after 1 o'clock yesterday [Sunday, 10 September] outside the Trades Hall and carried a resolution, 'That the workers and the trades unions of this country have no more confidence in the strike executive'. The gathering arose in extraordinary circumstances. One of the men was writing in chalk, in large block letters, on the wall of the building, an announcement as to a mass meeting to be held in the Domain on the following

afternoon, at 3 o'clock. Of the big crowd around him – it was growing in force every minute – some protested. 'Let it be this afternoon,' they cried. It was this incident which gave rise to the further proceedings. It was stated in the course of speeches that the men were on the eve of a great victory, and if the trades unionists remained stalwart they would win. 'Another fortnight,' said one speaker, 'and we have got them. Are we going back?' ('No.')

He concluded with the remark that the men would not go back until every one of the volunteers was removed. Other speakers held that the Strike Committee had thrown the men over, and that rather than see the men return under present conditions they would sell the Trades Hall. The motion was carried amidst almost deafening cheers, and with only a few dissentient hands against it. The crowd was so great that it spread itself along Goulburn-street practically from Sussex-street to the Trades Hall. A number of men, headed by one of the union banners, pushed their way through the crowd, and the men who were assembled were urged by one and another to join the procession and proceed to the Domain in order to discuss the position further.¹

Why was the decision to end the strike greeted with such anger? Later in this Chapter, the response to the decision will be related in greater detail. Here, it is sufficient to note that although, as we have seen in Chapter Three, the strike continued to grow as new groups of workers entered the fray right up to the first week of September, there were a number of key weaknesses in the strike movement. The call out of all railway and tramway workers by the Defence Committee – the only significant example of an official call out during the strike – was not universally adhered to. In particular, large sections of the railway service, especially in the country, never struck or returned early. Even where there was universal, or near universal, adherence to the strike, as was the case on the waterfront and in the coal mines, there was an effective campaign by the government to recruit 'volunteers' or scabs. Thousands of these, mostly, but not exclusively, drawn from the countryside, rallied to the government's call. They kept essential services going, and were particularly successful in replacing the relatively unskilled labour of the wharfies or of groups of workers like the carters and slaughtermen whose skills were likely to be found amongst rural volunteers.

The government propaganda throughout the strike painted a picture of a thriving railway service, of happy volunteers on the docks sturdily working harder than the slack unionists they replaced. The papers carried boast after boast of tramway and railways timetables returning to normal, of coal 'won' and of goods shipped. They also recorded, with more precise figures (and consequently more

¹ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 September 1917, p.7.

believability) a haemorrhage from the ranks of railway strikers that grew more and more substantial in the final weeks of the strike. Trade union officials, in both the labour press and – when they were given access to it – the establishment press, denied these boasts right up until the capitulation in early September. It was only in the aftermath of the strike that the scabbing effort, the success of which they had denied, or, at least, downplayed, during the strike, was presented in retrospect by the officials as an insurmountable barrier that made victory impossible.

It is little surprise that many rank and file workers on the NSW Railways, particularly in Sydney, saw the decision to capitulate on 9 September as a betrayal. They had been assured that victory was around the corner; then they were told, without any preparation, that they could not win and must return to face victimisation and all else that defeat entailed. To understand how and why the decision to end the strike was reached, it is necessary to look again at the progress of the strike and to examine and assess the weaknesses in the movement, both in the strike movement generally and, more specifically, in its leadership.

As we have seen, a defining feature of the Great Strike was the way it was driven from below. The inverse of this phenomenon was the widespread reluctance of officials to encourage, or in some cases to even sanction, strike action. The strike in the workshops began with official consent as a result of rank and file pressure and against the wishes of the Trades Hall head, E.J. Kavanagh; yet Kavanagh found himself in charge of running a strike that he clearly thought was a mistake. He famously complained that it was ‘harder to keep the men in’ than to get them out.² He complained, for instance, of the decision of the wharfies to join the strike:

The next difficulty the Committee was faced with was keeping the waterfront free, but, unfortunately, owing to the apostles of the general strike seeing in the ‘Black Doctrine’ the chance of realising their ideal, this was found to be impossible.³

² Labor Council of NSW, *Report and Balance Sheet for the Half-Year Ending December 31st 1917*, p.9. Also, the *Age*, 29 August 1917, p.7, cites unnamed Defence Committee members in Melbourne making an almost identical statement regarding the situation in Victoria.

³ *Report and Balance Sheet*, p.11. The term ‘Black Doctrine’ was commonly used in the press during the strike to describe the way in which solidarity action spread on the basis of goods or workers being described as ‘black’. Coal, for instance, was considered ‘black’ due to the miners’ strike and its delivery to a workplace might therefore lead to a walkout.

Kavanagh was not alone in his conservatism, though he was probably more extreme in his expression of his distaste for 'direct action' – or at least he was in the aftermath of the strike. The attitude of the leaders of the Locomotive Engine Drivers, Firemen and Cleaner's Association (LEDFCA) to the strike is revealing. The NSW secretary, Ainsworth, declared on 3 August that: 'The matter has not reached us yet; we have nothing to do with it [the strike] at present'.⁴ The decision to strike was taken at a stormy meeting of the metropolitan section of the union; later it spread to the stronger country branches at Bathurst and Goulburn. Official sanction followed this rebellion as the LEDFCA joined the general strike of railway employees on 6 August, calling its members in the country out as a consequence. Though, for reasons that are not explained, the Broken Hill branch of the union was telegraphed by Ainsworth on 9 August: 'Your branch is exempted by the defence committee. Work as usual.'⁵ George Crossman, the Federal Secretary of the union, made clear his hostility to the strike in a report published in the union's journal in early 1918.⁶

The officials of the LEDFCA were not the only reluctant leaders. The strike on the waterfront was also driven from below and, after it had been going for two weeks the federal leadership of the union engaged in a sustained effort to end it. The catalyst was a hearing before Justice Higgins on 23 August at which Higgins pressured the federal secretary of the Waterside Workers' Federation (WWF), Joe Morris, to end the strike or risk the loss of preference (the rule by which the union's members were picked first for casual labour on the waterfront).⁷ The next day the federal Committee of Management (COM) of the Waterside Workers' Federation met in Melbourne, for the first time since the beginning of the strike in Sydney three weeks previously. The minutes of that meeting, and the subsequent urgent correspondence between Morris and the various branches of the union throughout

⁴ *Daily Telegraph*, 3 August 1917, p.5.

⁵ *Barrier Miner*, 9 August 1917, p.4.

⁶ UMA Australian Federated Union of Railway and Locomotive Engineers papers, 10/1/1/2, *The Locomotive Journal of Australasia: The Official Organ of the Federal Railway Locomotive Engineers' Association*, 'Federal Executive's Report', January 1918, p.2.

⁷ *Age*, 24 August 1917, p.6, relates the following exchange: 'Higgins: How do you explain their conduct in leaving work? Morris: I cannot explain it at all. Lewis [Company Rep.]: Why don't you be frank and say that they are standing by their Sydney colleagues? Morris: They are doing nothing of the kind. The executive of the union has given them no instruction to do so. It is the men who are to blame and not the Federation.'

Australia, reveal his determination to end strike activity at all costs.⁸ It was an endeavour, however, in which determination was unable to guarantee success.

In the case of the Miners' Union, the federal leadership, dominated by Willis and Baddeley (respectively the president and secretary of the union) declared the strike official (as noted above in Chapter Three) only after most of the lodges had walked out.⁹ With the main railway union, the ARTSA, it is more difficult to discern the official attitude. We have seen that there were walkouts by sections such as the shunters before the strike was officially declared on 6 August. We also know that the officials of the ARTSA were keen to get the Tramways Union (with whom they sometimes competed for membership) to agree to strike before they called out their members.¹⁰ Yet they did manage to get such an agreement and, along with the previously reluctant officials of the LEDFCA, they called out their members throughout the state. Some insight into how this happened can be gleaned from a letter to the Acting-Premier sent by Percy Jennings, an official of the Railway Traffic Association (a tiny union which organised some of the shunters, porters and other employees of the Traffic Section of the railways). The purpose of the letter was an attempt by Jennings, who did not support the strike but wished to avoid scabbing, to resolve his personal dilemma by enlisting; he wanted the Premier to guarantee that he would be granted the same privilege as previous railway enlistees of having his army wage topped up by the Department. The letter describes the process by which the officials of the various unions were forced by rank and file pressure into calling the strike:

Our executive were called to meet Loco and Tramway Executives [on 4 August] on what is called the Grand Council and there our Executive strenuously opposed taking any action in the strike and the Tramway likewise opposed taking action, but the Loco stated they had already been drawn into the trouble through the fuel men in Eveleigh striking. After sitting for four hours the Council decided to recommend the three unions adhere to their Constitution. The same evening the Loco Drivers and Firemen struck and on Sunday a meeting of the Committee of the Traffic was called and they decided they would not scab, so took the alternative course.¹¹

⁸ ANU, NBA, WWF papers, T62/1/1. Committee of Management (COM) Minutes, 24 August 1917.

⁹ Their reluctance to strike is, in any case, recorded in most accounts. See, for instance, Turner, *Industrial Labour & Politics*, p.148.

¹⁰ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 August 1917, p.7-8, reported for instance that the ARTSA had requested that the Defence Committee call out the Tramways Union and that a 'Grand Council' of the railway and tramways unions met on the night of 5 August – the day before the call-out.

¹¹ NSA, 9/4747, Premier's Department Correspondence, Letter from Percy Jennings, 12 August 1917.

It is ironic, yet revealing in its own way, that the call out of railway and tramway workers – the only case where officials called out a significant group of workers who had not already struck (as opposed to officially sanctioning a *fait accompli*) – was so unsuccessful. The response to the official call-out of the railway and tramway workers was patchy from the start. Part of the problem, at least initially, came from a lack of communication. The ARTSA journal was later to complain that, despite the despatch of ninety telegrams to various parts of the state, ‘some of the branches complained that they had no information’ and that this was a particular problem with regard to the Permanent Way employees:

Naturally, it was very difficult to get in touch with such a widely scattered body of men as Fettleers and Gangers...Our letters are being steamed and opened and our telegrams delayed.¹²

These difficulties can be discerned in the delay between the call-out and the actual strike activity in some of the country areas. The railworkers in Lismore, for instance, took three days to answer the call, striking on 9 August.¹³ Even the Newcastle branch of the ARTSA claimed not to have received any instruction to strike on 6 August¹⁴, though they clearly had received instructions the next day.¹⁵

The communication problem was compounded by the lack of preparation. Country members were perplexed as their previously conservative leaders – under pressure from an insurgence that they, in the country, were untouched by – suddenly issued a call to strike (which if the call did not reach them, they only read about it in the press). In Albury, for instance:

Not a single man has gone on strike here [as of 8 August]. A secret ballot of members of the Amalgamated Railway and Tramway Service Association was taken this afternoon in response to two further telegrams received from Sydney to-day urging the men to cease work; but the men decided by a large majority to continue working. The men take the view that until they get

¹² *All Grades Advocate*, 23 August 1917, p.6.

¹³ *Northern Star*, 10 August 1917, p.5. Nevertheless, the traffic men in Lismore did not strike.

¹⁴ *Newcastle Herald and Miners' Advocate*, 7 August 1917, p.5: ‘The executive of the two tramway unions in Newcastle did not receive anything official regarding a cessation of work at 12 o’clock last night, and in consequence the men will turn up for work as usual this morning.’

¹⁵ *Newcastle Herald and Miners' Advocate*, 8 August 1917, p.7.

further particulars, which the secretary had telegraphed for, they are not justified in striking.¹⁶

As the *Herald* reported, regarding the Loco men:

The decision to strike on the part of the Sydney district of the Locomotive, Enginedrivers, Firemen and Cleaners' Union appears to have fallen like a bombshell amongst the country members of that body. These men work in scattered centres, and appear to be perplexed as to what course they should pursue. The men at Harden sent a delegate to town to interview the secretary. The two latter discussed the position briefly yesterday afternoon, but the result of the interview is unknown.¹⁷

The Murrurundi and Junee branches of the union wired the commissioners to express their loyalty.¹⁸ Despite this, the overall response from the engine drivers throughout the state was solid – at least initially, as the state secretary of the union, Ainsworth, was able to claim on 8 August:

The secretary of the Locomotive Engine Drivers and Firemen's Association (Mr. W. Ainsworth) stated yesterday that the members of his organisation were practically unanimous in their attitude. He had received returns as to the number of men who had knocked off work throughout the State. Certain centres, as follow, had been without dissentients in stopping: – Bathurst, Wellington, Nyngan, Narrabri, Port Waratah, Cowra, Wallerawang, Orange, Werris Creek, Eskbank, Milson's Point, the Newcastle steam trams, Thirroul, Hurstville, Enfield and Dubbo; Sydney, all out except 15; Parkes, 3 men in; Goulburn, 12 men in; Hamilton, 4; Valley Heights, 13; Penrith, 3; Picton, 1 non-unionist; Clyde, 2; Junee 2; and Hornsby 4. No advice had been received from Harden...The membership of the union was about 3700 of whom 600 were at the front...The department was bringing men who had remained loyal to it in the country down to Sydney, presumably hoping that this would have a demoralising effect on the men who were out. Several superannuated men, he asserted, had been called upon by the Department to run trains. He understood that a man of 70 years of age was engaged in this work.¹⁹

Overall, of 3,100 members of the Locomotive Enginedrivers, Firemen and Cleaners' Association working in the state – only fifty disobeyed the initial call to strike.²⁰ The

¹⁶ *Daily Telegraph*, 9 August 1917, p.5.

¹⁷ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 August 1917, p.9.

¹⁸ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 August 1917, p.7.

¹⁹ *Daily Telegraph*, 9 August 1917, p.5.

²⁰ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 August 1917, p.8.

big test, however, was to be how many would risk their seniority and pensions when these were threatened by the state government.

Unfortunately, not all the sections of the railways and railways unions were as solid as the loco men in their response to the strike call. The signalmen, for instance, members of the ARTSA, refused in a body to join, and, instead, held a meeting to affirm their loyalty to the Commissioners.²¹ The Darling Harbour Branch of the Traffic Employees Union did the same.²² More generally, it can be seen that the call out was more successful in some sections of the service than the other. The problem was most acute in the Permanent Way and Traffic sections of the service as the following figures, released by Commissioner Fraser on 9 August make clear:

<u>Branch</u>	<u>At Work</u>	<u>On Strike</u>
Tramway Traffic	350	3,283
Electrical	748	1,716
Signal Maintenance	314	274
Railway Permanent Way	4,075	472
Stores	61	127
Tramway Permanent Way	304	635
Locomotive	1,879	9,505
Railway Traffic	3,088	1,336
	-----	-----
	10,819	17,348 ²³

On 7 August, the State Government delivered an ultimatum to the railway strikers, giving them till Friday morning (10 August) to return. The threat was simple and clear in a proclamation from the Acting Premier:

After Friday next no Government employee on strike will go back to his old status. The men who stand by the Government in this crisis will be amply protected, and will receive and maintain seniority in the future. The men who refuse to return will lose the special rights and privileges which they now enjoy as employees of the State.

If the strike does not terminate before ordinary working time on Friday next, the Government will utilise the offers of services already made and will call for volunteers to assist in running the services of this State.

Enginedrivers, engineers, firemen, mechanics, and others necessary for maintaining railway and other traffic and the distribution of food supplies, are

²¹ *Sun*, 7 August 1917, p.5.

²² *Daily Telegraph*, 7 August 1917, p.6.

²³ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 August 1917, p.7; *All Grades Advocate* (the ARTSA journal), 18 October, p.3, carried an article entitled, 'I Told You So', which blamed a lowering of pay rates of Permanent Way staff on their 'pusillanimous' behaviour during the strike.

invited to offer their services. If they desire to stay in the Government's service, they will be kept in that service.

All men capable of assisting are invited to communicate with the Government.
(Signed) George W. Fuller²⁴

Hence Fuller's warning to the women's delegation on Thursday 9 August:

The men who remain on strike will lose their seniority as well as their other rights and privileges...Go out and tell them that to-morrow morning is their last opportunity.²⁵

On 8 August, the day after the proclamation, the Police Commissioner began swearing in special constables, drawn from the ranks of 'prison warders, ex-policemen, railway employees and others'.²⁶ On crunch day, 10 August, the *Sun* reported the response to the government's threat:

At the Eveleigh workshops, notwithstanding the pickets, a fair number of strikers disregarded all persuasion and returned to their old duties. An official's statement is made that the number of men who had resumed work is as follows: –

Eveleigh loco. workshops, 54 – the large proportion of them mechanics.
Eveleigh Carriage and Waggon Shops – 54 of whom 21 are carriage builders.
Clyde Repairing Siding – None resumed.
Eveleigh Running Sheds – 21 yesterday, and 28 additional this morning.
Goulburn Running Sheds – 46 drivers, 17 firemen, 6 cleaners, 5 laborers.
Orange – 5 additional men.

At Penrith and Moree a few additional men have come back.

At Armidale all the men remained loyal to the department.²⁷

The numbers returning were modest indeed, given the scale of the threat. There was even some strengthening of the strike, as the previously loyal workers in the town of Murrurundi walked out.²⁸ In Newcastle:

Very few men turned up this morning in response to the Government's appeal, the placing of strong bodies of pickets having a discouraging effect.²⁹

²⁴ *Sun*, 8 August 1917, p.7. Emphasis in original.

²⁵ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 August 1917, p.8.

²⁶ *Sun*, 8 August 1917, p.6; NSA, Chief Secretary's Correspondence, 5/7519, Letters to Undersecretary, Chief Secretary's Department from Inspector General of Police, 27 August – 12 December 1917, indicate that at least 801 special constables were sworn in during the strike. Many are listed, along with their normal occupation and also include clerical employees of companies affected along with nightwatchmen and gatekeepers.

²⁷ *Sun*, 8 August 1917, p.5.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

Little wonder that, as the *Sun* continued,

The feeling of the thousands of men who assembled at the Trades Hall to-day was one of confidence. There was a more buoyant spirit among all concerned than at the beginning of the trouble. Pickets were bringing the news into the various unions. The secretaries showed their reports, which were generally to the effect that the men had not responded to the invitation of the Government to return to work. There were meetings in almost every room, and cheers greeted the announcements that there had been no break in the solidarity of the ranks.³⁰

Picketing had helped hold the line. The *Herald* gives some indication of the atmosphere, and describes the type of picketing that took place, based on persuading any new returnees to hold the line, without any physical threat:

At a comparatively early hour this morning railway men on strike began to gather near the railway station, and little knots here and there discussed the prospects of the immediate future from widely divergent standpoints. 'I see old so-and-so went back yesterday,' remarked one. 'Well, you could hardly blame him,' responded a workmate, 'a man's not going to chuck up his Superannuation Fund savings of twenty years for nothing.' 'See that old bloke over there' said a newcomer among the group, rather excitedly, 'the one reading the letter, I mean. Well, that letter is from the Commissioners, offering him two quid a day to drive an engine. He's one of the old timers, and he won't go back, not if they offer him twice as much; but he'll have that letter read at the meeting this afternoon.' 'Strike me pink if we get an award for sixpence a day rise in wages the commissioners will spend half a hundred in trying to block it,' was the disgusted comment of another. Withal the men were quite orderly and temperate in argument. One man was pointed out as one who 'would have been back on the job this morning only he was grabbed going through the gate' by an enthusiastic union picket. This led to a discussion on the question of picket duty, from which it was gathered that pickets would be on duty all night continuously and till starting time in the morning as a precaution against the return of those who were referred to as 'cold footers'.³¹

The problem was, however, that with over a third of the service having refused to answer the initial call, the movement needed to be *increasing* the numbers on strike. Even a trickle back to work was potentially disastrous. The total numbers

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ *Daily Telegraph*, 10 August 1917, p.5.

working may have only increased from 10,819 to 11,323³², but the 500-odd who had returned included a significant number of the strategically vital engine drivers. These were the aristocrats of the railway service, and while they had genuine grievances of their own³³, they also had the most to lose, both through demotion to a lower waged position and through loss of superannuation. According to the *Herald*, the number of drivers available at Eveleigh from Monday 6 August to Friday 10 August increased from thirty eight to 214. This was a significant and rapid disaffection of a strategically important group of strikers.³⁴ In the countryside the situation was (proportionally) even worse. The entire rail workforce was still working in some centres such as Harden, Junee, Narrandra, Eskbank and Armidale. Sixty fireman and drivers returned at Bathurst, and seventy two at Goulburn.³⁵

There was some strengthening of the strike in the days following these defections, as officials of the ARTSA visited some of the country areas in an effort to reach the more remote groups of workers with something more effective than a telegram. Fettleers in Bowral and Newcastle walked out ('3 to 400' in the latter case) on the 11 August.³⁶ The traffic employees in Dubbo walked out on 12 August.³⁷ However, the exchange of striking fettleers for scabbing train drivers was, on balance, a strategic loss for the movement, even if the raw number of strikers actually increased. Moreover, on 14 August, the government was handed a major propaganda victory, when the President of the Traffic Association, Robert Todd, returned to work at Hurstville, leading the entire Hurstville staff of guards with him.³⁸ The participation of the Traffic section in the strike was already weak; it now began to collapse completely. Todd explained his decision to return as a reaction to an attempt by IWW members to raise a banner in a strike procession – even though the banner

³² *Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 August 1917, p.11.

³³ *Daily Telegraph*, 9 August 1917, p.6, cites Ainsworth, secretary of the LEDFCA: 'Do you know – do the public know – that the eight-hour principle, as it is applied to us, is a misnomer? Do you know that an engine-man is nearly always by night or day at the service of the commissioners? A man may be called to sign on at 2 a.m., and when he arrives with his food supply for a long journey he is told that he is not wanted, but to come back again at 4 a.m. He comes back again at 4 a.m. and with cold-blooded indifference the official tells him to return again, probably at 5 a.m. For this he is not paid. He has been walking and waiting all through the night, and then when the official deigns to "sign him on" he is worked for anything up to 12, and sometimes 13 hours.'

³⁴ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 August 1917, p.11.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 August 1917, p.8.

³⁷ *Daily Telegraph*, 14 August 1917, p.6.

³⁸ *Sun*, 14 August 1917, p.7.

had been torn down by the strikers.³⁹ His defection was followed by that of F. W. Flower, the president of the NSW branch of the Electrical Trades Union (who resigned his union position) and by E.D. Campbell, an ex-president of the ARTSA.⁴⁰

Figure 1:⁴¹

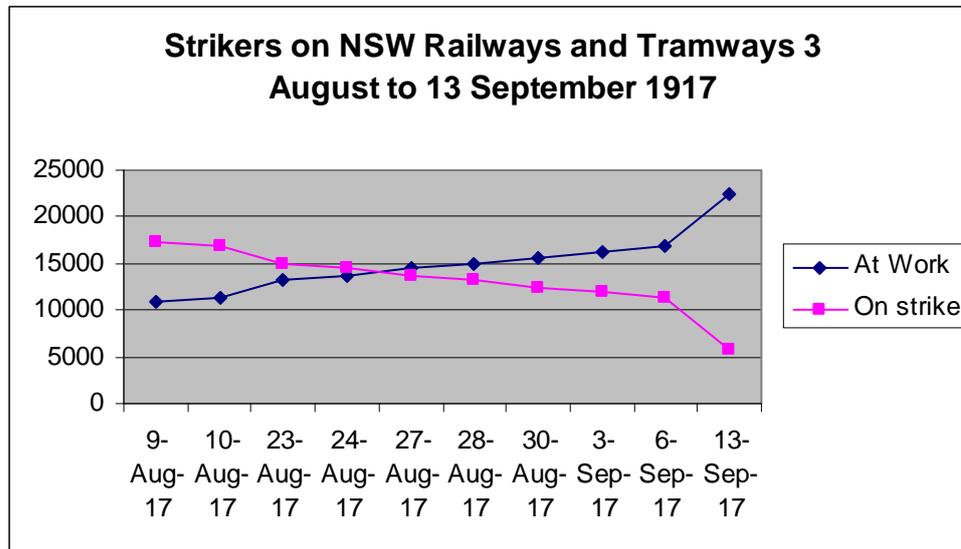


Figure 1 charts the numbers of original employees of the railway and tramway service on strike or working from the beginning of the strike to its official settlement on 9 September. It shows that there was a steady decrease in the number of strikers, which reached a critical point between 24 and 27 August when the numbers of ‘loyal’ and returned staff outnumbered the ranks of strikers. It also shows, however, that the rate of decrease was remarkably steady; there was no decisive collapse until *after* the settlement on 9 September (reflected in the sudden drop in numbers between 6 September and 13 September).

The weakness in the ranks of the railways and tramways staff was not entirely unexpected. There is evidence that part of the motivation for the widespread solidarity action came from recognition that the railways unions were poorly organised and needed assistance. At a crucial meeting of the Melbourne Waterside Workers on 25 August, E. Jones, the president of the Victorian branch of the union, along with the Victorian secretary, J. Williams, defeated the attempt by their federal

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ *Sun*, 16 August 1917, p.5.

⁴¹ Figures from various reports in: *Daily Telegraph*, 9, 10, 23, 24, 27, 28 & 30 August 1917, 3 & 6 September 1917, and *Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 September 1917.

secretary, Joe Morris, to institute a secret ballot for a return to work. Part of their argument was that: ‘The railway workers of New South Wales were said to be relying to a great extent on the help of the waterside workers.’⁴² The problem of scabbing on the railways was, therefore, not in and of itself fatal to the strike’s success. The crucial issue was whether the big battalions brought into battle to support the railway workers could win the fight for them. Here the crucial problem was not one of lack of compliance with a strike call. As we have seen, the enthusiasm for action, amongst coal miners and wharfies in particular, was such that official strike calls were unnecessary, except in some cases to add a *de jure* status to a *de facto* reality. The problem, particularly on the waterfront, was the recruitment of scabs by the government.

The initiative for setting up the National Service Bureaus in Sydney and Melbourne appears to have come from the federal rather than the state government. On 17 August Hughes wrote to Fuller:

NATIONAL SERVICE BUREAUS. We have established a central office here and a Victorian branch...I think it most advisable that labor should be engaged in your State through the National Service Bureau. I will appoint anybody you wish to nominate.⁴³

⁴² *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 August 1917, p.8: ‘The two delegates of the Wharf Labourers’ Union who were sent to Sydney in a motor car to ascertain the support that is expected from Victoria by the Sydney strikers arrived back Saturday night. They left Sydney on Tuesday, but the condition of the road was very bad, and at times the car was bogged up to the axles. A meeting of the Wharf Labourers’ Union was held to-day, and it was decided that the strike should continue. It is stated that Messrs. Jones and Williams, the returned delegates, asserted that the unionists in Sydney were even more solid now than they were at the beginning of the strike. The railway workers of New South Wales were said to be relying to a great extent on the help of the waterside workers. Mr. Morris, the secretary of the Waterside Workers’ Federation, addressed the gathering, pointing out that if the strike continued Mr. Justice Higgins had threatened to deprive the union of a clause in the award providing for preference to unionists. A stormy discussion took place, and eventually it was recommended that a secret ballot should be taken on the question of whether there should be a resumption of work in Melbourne. Later it was resolved that the matter regarding the continuance of the strike should be decided then and there.’; *Daily Telegraph*, 27 August 1917, p.6, makes it likely that Jones and Williams were arguing in opposition to Morris: ‘Mr. Morris referred to the proceedings instituted by the Steamship Association for the deletion of certain clauses from the award governing waterside workers, and the suggestion of Mr. Justice Higgins that a ballot on the question of the resumption of work should be taken by the men, giving till Thursday for the decision. The ballot proposal was bitterly opposed by a section of the meeting, *including some of the leaders* [emphasis added], and it was eventually decided by a narrow majority that the question of resumption or otherwise be determined by a show of hands.’

⁴³ NSA, 9/4760, Premiers’ Department, Inwards Correspondence, letter from Hughes to Fuller, 17 August 1917.

Fuller had already been presented with ample evidence of middle class and rural support for a showdown with the unions. As early as 3 August he was able to boast of offers of assistance from university engineering students.⁴⁴ There were meetings held and resolutions passed supporting the government in Dubbo, Gundagai, Guyra, Yass, Manildra, Tingha, Gosford, Bowral, Bourke, Ulmarra, Parkes, Walcha, Nowra and Grenfell.⁴⁵ The task for the government was to turn this sentiment into more active support. By 14 August, the railways had already recruited their own ‘replacements’ for some of the strikers: ‘about 800 men have been taken on in place of the strikers.’⁴⁶ That day the *Sydney Morning Herald* speculated that:

It is expected that in the course of the next few days a very large number of farmers will have taken up residence in Sydney prepared to go to work at once in assisting the Government to maintain the necessary services of the State.⁴⁷

The speculation was based on news of an offer of support to the Premier from the Farmers and Settlers’ Association.⁴⁸ The *Herald* also carried an announcement by Prime Minister Hughes that the Waterside Workers Federation, from which he had so recently been expelled as President, would be the main target of government-organised scabbing: ‘They [the wharfies] have lent themselves to the general conspiracy...What the ministry proposes to do is carry on the business of the country’⁴⁹.

On 15 August the state government commandeered all motor vehicles in NSW.⁵⁰ It already claimed to have 5,000 volunteers enrolled on its books⁵¹ and proceeded to organise the provision of a camp at the Sydney Cricket Ground (SCG) to house them.⁵² By the time Hughes was writing his letter to Fuller on 17 August, advising about the usefulness of a Bureau, there were already over 1,000 camped at the SCG, 300 of whom were employed loading and unloading ships on the waterfront.

⁴⁴ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 August 1917, p.13.

⁴⁵ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 August 1917, p.8.

⁴⁶ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 August 1917, p.9.

⁴⁷ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 August 1917, p.7.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, p.8.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*. Hughes had helped form the WWF and remained its President, even as Prime Minister, up until the split over conscription in 1916. The correspondence of the union (archived at ANU, NBA, WWF Correspondence, T62/16/1) still appeared at the time of the strike on letterhead with Hughes’ name neatly ruled out at the top.

⁵⁰ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 August 1917, p.9.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, p.10.

⁵² *Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 August 1917, p.7.

The day before he wrote to Fuller, Hughes announced the appointment of G.G. Haldane, the chief-accountant of the Postmaster-General's Department, as the head of the National Service Bureau and added that the government intended to open bureaus in every major town and city in NSW and Victoria.⁵³

In Victoria the bureau was important as an organising centre, as, unlike in Sydney, there were no camps for rural volunteers. Indeed, in Melbourne most of the volunteers were recruited from Melbourne itself, and rural volunteers were to be directed eventually to a special operation to open up two coal mines in NSW (see Chapter Six for a detailed discussion of this). An advertisement appeared in the *Age* on 20 August calling on volunteers to register for 'National Service'. Under a Commonwealth Government logo, it indicated where the 'volunteers' would be required. The 'principle classes of work for which men may be required are coaling, loading, discharging, despatching, working ships, handling wheat, flour, foodstuffs, &c.'⁵⁴

The advertisement took the form of a cut-out which could be filled in and sent to the 'National Service Bureau, 145 King St'. The next day the *Age* announced - as it continued to do throughout the rest of August - a flood of recruits, and called for more to register the next day at the Bureau's new headquarters at the Athenaeum in Collins Street. It reassured potential strike-breakers that they had nothing to fear from the strikers, as '...the wharf labourers as a body, acting on the advice of their leaders, will shun the locality.'⁵⁵

As the strike developed over the next weeks, the two Melbourne broadsheets, the *Age* and the *Argus*, were able to provide their mainly middle class readership with the heartening news that, as well as growing unrest, there was a mobilisation of the middle class in favour of the government. The turning point was 20 August. As well as the advertisement for volunteers, the *Age* published offers of support to the government from 'a representative of public companies in Queen St', the Ancient Mariners' Association and the Amateur Sporting Federation.⁵⁶ Even the Red Cross

⁵³ *Age*, 17 August 1917, p.7.

⁵⁴ *Age*, 20 August 1917, p.10.

⁵⁵ *Age*, 21 August 1917, p.5.

⁵⁶ *Age*, 20 August 1917, p.8; *Argus*, 20 August 1917, p.8, provides a, perhaps unexpected, example of support running in the opposite direction from a meeting which declared that: 'The Orangemen on strike stand loyally to the strike committee in the honest endeavour to fight for the cause of liberty' - an interesting unanimity with Catholic Archbishop Mannix from across the sectarian divide; *Daily Telegraph*, 18 August 1917, p.10, provides a parallel example from Sydney: 'A number of railway and tramway men, members of the Loyal Orange Institution, waited upon the Acting Premier yesterday.'

offered its support to the strikebreaking effort.⁵⁷ Over the following weeks, the daily tallies of recruits at the Bureau were highlighted every day, under headlines such as 'A Rush of Free Labour'. Behind the hyperbole, the figures were clearly building. On the first day, 20 August, 462 had registered. The next day another 400 registered (but only 600 were working, implying some disorganisation, turnover, or a combination of both).⁵⁸

The first priority of the Melbourne Bureau was unloading the wheat crop and getting the waterfront working. The wheat stacking operation had been provided with 160 strikebreakers as early as 16 August, before the Bureau was fully operational. Forty of these were students from Melbourne University who, the *Age* assured its readers, were 'having the time of their lives'.⁵⁹ Later the entire senior form of Geelong Grammar was to put themselves at the disposal of the Geelong National Defence Committee (which itself had undertaken to organise volunteer labour in Geelong).⁶⁰ Scotch College boys were engaged to paint a Commonwealth Steamer in place of striking painters and dockers,⁶¹ and a number of masters from Melbourne Grammar joined their senior boys on the waterfront.⁶²

In Sydney, the efforts of the Farmers and Graziers Association, and the establishment of the camp at the SCG made the establishment of a Bureau, if not unnecessary, something of an anti-climax. By 18 August, the Premier was able to state, that with 2,000 volunteers already at work and 5,000 names on the books, no more were required 'at present'.⁶³ He also gave the first of several pledges to those volunteers who wished to remain in employment after the strike that they would be guaranteed employment. This was a threat of particular importance on the waterfront. Work on the wharves was not completely unskilled – there was an art in properly

Introduced by R.E. Barton, the Deputy Grand Master of the order, they included a Mr. Lawler (Randwick workshops) and a Mr. F. Walker (Traffic Branch). The main gist of the delegation was to assure Fuller that the strike was not political and to ask for a return to the old conditions of service. . *Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 August 1917, p.8, reported that 'Mr. Bardon said that the members of the railway and tramway traffic branches and the workshops, who are also members of the Loyal Orange Lodge, held a meeting that morning. The members of the L.O.L. desired to be loyal, but the men were not satisfied with the conditions that existed in the various workshops, and they asked that some inquiry should be made.'

⁵⁷ *Age*, 21 August 1917, p.6, reports a meeting of 'soldiers & volunteers of the Red Cross movement' at Prahran Town Hall voting to lend its support to the government.

⁵⁸ *Age*, 21 August 1917, p.5 and 22 August 1917, p.7.

⁵⁹ *Age*, 17 August 1917, p.7.

⁶⁰ *Age*, 21 August 1917, p.6.

⁶¹ *Age*, 24 August 1917, p.5.

⁶² *Argus*, 24 August 1917, p.7.

⁶³ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 August 1917, p.8.

stowing goods into a ship. It was, however, comparatively easy to learn, and whilst unexperienced men could not do the job as efficiently as experienced wharfies, they could still load and unload ships. The waterfront was, therefore, one of the first destinations for the volunteers from the SCG. On 17 August for instance, with 1,300 volunteers in camp, 800 were working on the wharves.⁶⁴ On 20 August, 300 volunteers were registered to replace the striking coal lumpers.⁶⁵ The number working on the waterfront now totalled 1,525.⁶⁶ That day 200 were sent from the camp to replace the striking workforce at the abattoirs.⁶⁷ It was not difficult to find men with slaughtering skills amongst the ranks of country volunteers.⁶⁸ Replacing the striking carters with rural volunteers was easy for much the same reason. As one railway worker, John Mongan, recalled in an oral history interview:

I can remember the cockys as they call them, the farmers driving the wagons down Sussex Street and all the strikers would be lined up in the street and be singing 'pretty cocky' to them and all this sort of thing⁶⁹

There was little or no organised attempt to stop the scabbing. When asked by his interviewer whether he remembered seeing any pickets during the strike (immediately after the reminiscence above) Mongan answered, 'No'. In September a police report stated baldly 'There are no pickets in the vicinity of the wharves at all.'⁷⁰ There were, instead, reports of unofficial and individual acts of violence against waterfront scabs. The son of a coal lumper recalled, regarding a camp at Dawes Point set up to house the scab coal lumpers:

I think one time there the volunteers' tents were set on fire with the fellows still asleep inside them. And they had to be escorted down to the ships with

⁶⁴ *Sun*, 17 August 1917, p.5.

⁶⁵ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 August 1917, p.7.

⁶⁶ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 August 1917, p.7.

⁶⁷ *Sun*, 21 August 1917, p.6.

⁶⁸ Another way of circumventing the meatworkers' strike was a relaxation of regulations regarding the operation of small private slaughterhouses. This was to cause some problems with health and hygiene, as was admitted after the strike. For instance, NSA, 9/4749, Premiers' Department Correspondence, Letter from Acting Chief Veterinary Officer, 8 January 1918: 'It was quite apparent during the recent industrial trouble that as soon as the slightest concessions were made, or there was the faintest symptom of relaxation of By-laws, irregular practices commenced.'

⁶⁹ NLA, Oral TRC 2301, NSW Bicentennial oral history collection, INT. 35, Interview with John Mongan.

⁷⁰ NSA, 5/75/3, Chief Secretary's Office, Inwards Correspondence, Police Report, 'Strike Office, Central Police Station', 22 September 1917.

their shovels...on Bowman Lane – that’s where the Beehive Hotel was – they used to throw the house bricks over there down on top of them.⁷¹

What appears like a more substantial, and therefore, in some way, organised attempt to disrupt the scabs can be found in the recollection of Arthur Emblem, a farmer’s son from Tamworth who volunteered on the docks:

On one occasion I can remember we were loading a ship at Pymont, I think there was about two hundred and fifty volunteers, and as we knocked off at five o’clock there were about four or five hundred strikers lined up outside the fence waiting for us. We were willing to go out and have a go but of course we weren’t allowed to do that but it got a bit serious and they called the army out. I think about a hundred army with fixed bayonets; the strikers moved on.⁷²

This confrontation, however, is not recorded anywhere in the press or in the existing police reports.

One violent confrontation, however, was widely reported. Emblem also recalled that the scabbing effort ‘was done through a politician by the name of Wearne. He was the member for New England, I think...’.⁷³ Wearne had a younger brother, Reginald, who was working as a volunteer, driving a cart to and from the wharves. The *Herald* obligingly reported the younger Wearne’s version of a confrontation that took place on 30 August:

A number of men alleged to be carters out on strike attacked two volunteer carters in Bridge-road, Camperdown, near the Children’s Hospital...and in the struggle that ensued two of the strikers were shot, one being fatally injured. Reginald James Wearne, a stock and station agent, of Bingara, and Charles Thorpe, both volunteer workers, were returning from Birt’s wharf with their waggons, having each discharged a load of jam for the troops at the front. At 4.45 p.m., as they were going along Bridge-road, just abreast of the Children’s Hospital, a number of men who were congregated on the footpath commenced to call out insulting remarks, one of them saying, ‘You ----- scabs and -----’...Wearne, who was sitting on the box driving the horses, attempted to hand over the reins to a little boy who was with him and protect himself, but he was not quick enough, and [one of the men] hit him on the head, knocking him off his seat. The assailant then jumped on him, almost dazing him, and then left

⁷¹ NLA, Oral TRC 2301, NSW Bicentennial oral history collection, INT. 10, Interview with Martin Brothers.

⁷² NLA, Oral TRC 2301, NSW Bicentennial oral history collection, INT. 186, Interview with Arthur Emblem.

⁷³ Ibid.

the lorry. Whilst this was going on Thorpe, who was driving in the rear, was attacked from behind by another man and knocked off the lorry. As he fell his foot dragged in the reins, and he was dragged along by the trotting horses for some distance, and then seized by the mob of men and taken to a vacant allotment. Here he was being violently attacked when Wearne looked back and saw him. Wearne stopped his horses, and, drawing his revolver, ran to his friend's assistance, calling out to his attackers as he approached, 'Keep back or I'll fire.' One of the men then picked up a stone and then rushed at him...Struck and dazed he fired his revolver.⁷⁴

Wearne fatally shot Mervyn Ambrose Flanagan and wounded Henry Williams, both carters. He was acquitted on the grounds of self defence, but not before receiving hundreds of messages of support, which are still preserved in a scrapbook in the Mitchell Library in Sydney. The scrapbook provides an insight into the class polarisation that fuelled the volunteer movement. Many of the letters use terms like 'blaguard [sic]', 'rabble' and 'cussed impudence' when referring to the strikers. The headmaster of Annandale Public School wrote that 'The duty of the Govt is to arm every one of them [volunteers]'. One Victor Nulley JP asserted in his letter of support to Wearne that 'you were far too lenient in the way you acted'. A correspondent from Victoria added:

The way things are going with our easy Governments and Judges not stamping out these I.W.W. and Sinn Feiners like Blasted Old Mannix in Melbourne and a Judge Given Preference to Unionism. The Scum of the Earth. The place will soon not be fit to live in. Better let the Blacks have the Country.⁷⁵

The confrontation with Wearne, while more dramatic than most, was typical of the random, and mostly individual, acts of violence and sabotage that erupted during the strike. The reluctance of the Defence Committee and the individual unions to attempt mass picketing or any other way of confronting the scabs simply meant that the confrontation that occurred was generally individual and violent. On the night of 17 August the train line was greased between Kelso and Raglan near Bathurst, 'with the result that a goods train out of Bathurst took 40 minutes to cover the two miles'.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 31 August 1917, p.7.

⁷⁵ All quotes to be found in the Mitchell Library, ML MSS1351, 'Reginald James Wearne Papers, 1917-1952'.

⁷⁶ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 August 1917, p.8.

A shot was made at a passing train near Carcoar on 30 August, and on the same night a stone 'weighing 60 lbs' was placed on a rail-line near Singleton.⁷⁷ On 2 September:

...some pieces of metal and bolts were discovered on the East Greta Company's railway near Abermain. The bolts had been driven into the rail joints. The metal was lying loose on the rails.⁷⁸

Similarly, on 6 September:

An attempt was made last night to wreck the passenger train from Sydney to Wollongong by placing a kerosene tin of heavy bolts on four feet of railway line between Bellambi and Corrimal...While passing under one of the overhead bridges a signalman was subjected to a fusillade of stones.⁷⁹

Violence against scabs even led, in one instance, to a fatality. Alfred Vincent Green, a 30-year-old loyalist cleaner, who had scabbed on a cleaners' strike only three weeks before the Great Strike erupted⁸⁰, was acting as fireman on a train south from Sydney towards Wollongong on the night of 25 August.

After passing Wombarra platform...the line takes a curve before nearing Coledale station, and at this particular spot on each side of the line the bush is very dense...It is supposed that a shot was fired from each side of the train intending to injure both driver and fireman, the fireman receiving the shots in the arms and the chest, the driver escaping any injury.⁸¹

A clumsy attempt was made to frame two miners, who were allegedly members of the IWW, for this attack – Frederick Lowden, aged 27, and James McEnaney, aged 26, both 'miners and natives of England'.⁸² The frame-up partly relied on the exceptionally convenient discovery of two bullets wrapped in an IWW songbook during a police search of their premises (after their arrest). Fortunately for the two miners, the police case collapsed due to the unreliability of their chief witness, and the

⁷⁷ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 September 1917, p.11.

⁷⁸ *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners' Advocate*, 3 September 1917, p.4.

⁷⁹ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 7 September 1917, p.8.

⁸⁰ *Daily Telegraph*, 27 August 1917, p.4.

⁸¹ *Illawarra Mercury*, 31 August 1917, p.4.

⁸² *Sydney Morning Herald*, 5 September 1917, p.10.

fact that the accused were both attending meetings in Sydney on the day of the shooting.⁸³

Random violence of this sort was unlikely to have a significant impact on the scabbing effort, which became larger and better organised as the strike progressed. In Melbourne, where the waterfront provided a larger proportion of the strikers, the centrality of the waterfront to the scabbing effort was even more evident than in Sydney. The *Age* of 21 September supplied its readers with a breakdown of 'engagements' of 'volunteers' by the Bureau since the beginning of its operations. It had employed 2,831 as wharf labourers, 1,112 as general labourers, 511 as drivers and 303 as wheat stackers.⁸⁴

In Sydney, by 23 August, there were 2,300 'volunteers' at work, mostly as drivers and on the waterfront.⁸⁵ On 25 August a second major camp for volunteers was opened at Taronga Park Zoo, initially housing 1,200.⁸⁶ By 27 August there were 3,000 volunteers working.⁸⁷ In addition to the 200 working at the abattoirs, there were a large, but unrecorded, number working as carters, 500 at Cockatoo Docks⁸⁸ and a number at CSR.⁸⁹ By 4 September, there were 5,833 volunteers in Sydney employed in various capacities - 1,066 on the waterfront alone. On 7 September, the Award of the Trolley and Draymen's Union was cancelled. On 8 September, the Waterside Workers' Federation had the preference clause of its Award cancelled in the ports of Bowen, Mackay, Brisbane, Newcastle, Sydney, Melbourne and Fremantle.⁹⁰ The wharves were operating at near normal capacity with scab labour and preference had been lost. The idea that the wharfies could use their industrial strength to help the less-well organised railway workers had been turned on its head.

⁸³ ANU, NBA, ACSEF Papers, E165/15/2, ACSEF records, 'Statement of accused F. Lowden regarding Coledale shooting.'

⁸⁴ *Age*, 21 September 1917, p.5. Significantly, the report notes that there was considerable turnover and that 'no more than 1,200' were working on the wharves at any one time. The normal waterfront workforce was around 3,000.

⁸⁵ *Sun*, 23 August 1917, p.5.

⁸⁶ *Sun*, 24 August 1917, p.5.

⁸⁷ *Sun*, 27 August 1917, p.5.

⁸⁸ *Daily Telegraph*, 29 August 1917, p.7.

⁸⁹ ANU, NBA, CSR papers, 142/204, Letter from CSR Yarraville to Head Office (Sydney), 30 August 1917, complains that the Bureau in Melbourne was unwilling to supply volunteers whereas the Sydney Bureau had been generous in supplying them to the Pyrmont factory.

⁹⁰ *Sun*, 8 September, 1917 p.5. The Queensland ports were included because, while in general, the wharfies did not strike in Queensland ports, there were cases where they refused to unload individual ships from Sydney. See, *Brisbane Courier Mail*, 20 August 1917, p.6, regarding Brisbane, 28 August 1917, p.7, for Mackay, and 10 September 1917, p.7, for Bowen.

Given the scale of repression and the extent of the scabbing operation, combined with the weakness of the railway strike, the problems facing the strikers seem, in retrospect, insurmountable. We return then to the question asked at the opening of this chapter: why were the strikers outside Trades Hall on 10 September so convinced that the strike could have been won and that they had been sold out? Part of the answer can be found in the labour press and in the official pronouncements by trade union leaders during the strike. In response to the triumphant boasts of the Acting Premier, echoed daily by the commentary of a press hostile to the strike, the union leaders and Labor politicians were keen to downplay the success of the scabbing effort. In a Domain speech on 24 August, for instance (for which he was later arrested and charged with sedition), the Labor MLA for Surrey Hills, A.W. Buckley, displayed an extreme version of this triumphalism:

The Government could not hold out another week, but the men could hold solid for a month or two. I know of a development which will in a few days have the effect of bringing about compromise. The men were going back victorious, and then the Lieutenant-Governor would have to get the resignation of the Government, which no longer represents the people.⁹¹

More common was a refutation of the more extreme claims made by the establishment press such as this one from Jack Lang's local paper, the *Cumberland Times*:

The wild tales about men flocking back in hundreds are simply balderdash, circulated with a view to set in a 'rot'. But Unionists are too educated, at this day, to be gulled by tripe of this description.⁹²

This (of course) conveniently enabled the propagandist to avoid dealing with the uncomfortable reality that, while strikers were not 'flocking back' they *were* trickling back.

These arguments, however, would have fallen on receptive ears. When Buckley made his triumphant prediction of imminent victory, he was addressing a crowd of thousands at a Friday meeting in the Domain. The Sunday before and the Sunday following his speech both saw crowds of over 100,000. To most strikers and

⁹¹ *Sun*, 26 August 1917, p.2.

⁹² *Cumberland Times*, 28 August 1917, p.1.

their families, the experience of the Great Strike was a once-in-a-lifetime taste of collective power. This was not a passive bureaucratic strike, but a tumultuous carnival of protest. The energy and humour of the strikers, singing ‘Solidarity’, thumping out ragtime tunes at mass meetings and, above all, filling the streets and the Domain on a daily basis, could not have been further from the image of dour struggle and privation which is summoned by the notion of a strike which was failing. The strike had weaknesses, and these may well have been fatal, but most likely it did not feel like that at the time.

Such is clear, in any case, from the anger expressed at the news of settlement. The impromptu mass meeting described at the beginning of this chapter was not the only example of mass defiance. The settlement accepted by the Defence Committee on the 9 September contained two clauses which, along with the acceptance of the Card System, were to be a cause for much anger in the following weeks:

Clause 6: The Railway Commissioner is to have discretion in filling all vacancies, but in making appointments prior consideration will be given to the claims of applicants who were in the service of the Commissioner on or before August 1 last.

Clause 7: It is mutually understood that work should be resumed without resentment, and employment offered without vindictiveness.⁹³

Clause 7 allowed the officials to pretend that they had a protection against victimisation, but it was, of course, completely negated by Clause 6. The deal was finalised on the night of Saturday, 8 September. Only one union refused to endorse the settlement, the Sydney Wharf Labourers (for whom, as we shall see later in this chapter, the presence of scabs on the waterfront, made a return at this stage impossible).⁹⁴ The terms were printed in the Sunday papers evoking the response outside the Trades Hall related at the beginning of this chapter. The date of the proposed return to work was Monday or Tuesday, 10-11 of September, giving time for the individual unions to hold mass meetings. The definition of union democracy involved in this process was flexible, to say the least. The officials showed some concern to consult the rank and file, but this did not stop them from ordering strikers to return to work before such consultation took place. Nor was it to stop some from

⁹³ *Sun*, 9 September 1917, p.2.

⁹⁴ *Daily Telegraph*, 10 September 1917, p.6, adds that the only reason they voted against the settlement (as opposed to the forty unions that did) was because they needed to consult their executive.

ordering their members back after the settlement was explicitly rejected by mass meetings:

Although the Strike Committee and the Industrial Commissioner have agreed upon the terms for the settlement of the railway and tramway strike, the final decision will rest with the rank and file of the men themselves. To this end meetings of the men concerned have been convened for to-day, at which terms will be explained in detail by executive officers, and the men urged to accept them. There is at present a good deal of dissatisfaction amongst sections of the men, particularly with respect to the question of victimisation, but the officials are hopeful that they will be able to convince them that the settlement is the best possible in the circumstances...The engineers have been advised by circular to submit themselves for work at 7.30 a.m. to-morrow morning, and members of the Amalgamated Railway and Tramway Service Association in the country districts have been similarly advised by telegram...⁹⁵

A.E. Dengate, an organiser with the ASE, while speaking in the Domain on Sunday 9 September, gave a somewhat disingenuous answer to a query from the crowd regarding victimisation. He said that

the men would report for duty on Tuesday as though they had been absent from work for only one day. There would be no application or medical examination, as in the case of a new man entering the service. 'If these terms are not adhered to,' he added, 'come back to us, and we will continue the fight on your behalf.'⁹⁶

The militant metropolitan branch of the Loco men, which had played such a crucial role in spreading the strike beyond the workshops, were so angry at the settlement that they pre-empted an official mass meeting and organised their own.

About 600 to 700 locomotive railway men assembled at Newtown yesterday and discussed the published terms of settlement. Almost to a man they expressed bitter resentment at the Strike Committee's action, and more than one angrily exclaimed: 'We have been sold.' It was apparent that the men had hoped for a more definite undertaking with regard to reemployment of strikers, and one member declared, amidst approval, that if a satisfactory explanation was not forthcoming they ought to 'sack' their Defence Committee and select another in its place. In the absence of executive officers no resolution was carried, pending an explanation to be made to a general meeting convened for this morning. The fact that the men, on their banner in the procession

⁹⁵ *Daily Telegraph*, 10 September 1917, p.5.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

yesterday, flaunted the words, 'No surrender,' is indicative of the resentment they felt.⁹⁷

Anger at the settlement was not confined to the city. In Lithgow on 9 September: 'railwaymen and others marched beneath their banner, which gave their answer as, "No".'⁹⁸ In Bathurst on 10 September:

There were turbulent scenes at a mass meeting of railway strikers held to-day, when the terms of the settlement were considered. Many speakers indignantly protested against the acceptance of such terms, and openly advocated that men should not go back until their grievances were redressed. The chairman had the greatest difficulty in maintaining order, and eventually, amidst confusion, the meeting adjourned till this afternoon when some finality will be reached.⁹⁹

The *Telegraph* reported what happened once the Bathurst meeting reconvened:

...the strikers met again, and the disorder was even more marked. However, after much dispute, it was also decided, in the event of returning to work, not to sign any individual application form, and that the men should merely register their names. Late this afternoon the strikers marched in a procession to the railway yards, where they handed in their names for re-employment, but refused to sign any papers. Subsequently a further meeting decided to hold a mass meeting to-morrow morning to decide finally what action will be taken. It is doubtful if the boilermakers and engineers will return to work, for it is understood that to-night they held a meeting and decided to remain out until further notice. The men generally are most hostile towards the leaders, and will take some inducing to return to work.¹⁰⁰

In Newcastle, little scope was given for rank and file dissent:

The Union Picture Theatre was engaged for two mass meetings, at 2 and 3.30. These were for men engaged in the iron trades, and the railway and tramway men. The press was excluded. Messrs. Reeder, Ward, Farquharson, and other prominent officials were in attendance. No ballot was taken, nor were the men consulted at all. The instructions were that they return to work this morning.¹⁰¹

⁹⁷ *Daily Telegraph*, 10 September 1917, p.6.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ *Sun*, 10 September 1917, p.5.

¹⁰⁰ *Daily Telegraph*, 11 September 1917, p.5.

¹⁰¹ *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners' Advocate*, 11 October 1917, p.4.

However, it was at the meeting of the original strikers - the skilled workers from the workshops - that the most dramatic conflict occurred. As the *Telegraph* reported on 11 September:

A big meeting of the members of the Amalgamated Society of Engineers, the Australian Engineers, Moulders' Union, Blacksmiths' Union, Steel, Iron, and Brass Dressers' Union, Electrical Trades' Union, Sheet Iron and Metal Workers and Coachmakers' Union, was held at the Town Hall yesterday morning. The president of the Amalgamated Society of Engineers (Mr. Pagden) occupied the chair. Loud hoots greeted Mr. Pagden's explanation of the conditions on which the Defence Committee had agreed to a return to work. He advised the men to resume provisionally to-morrow morning. A voice: we won't! At this stage the meeting developed into a scene of uproar. Men stood up and argued heatedly, while no one could make himself distinctively heard. At length the chairman enticed the meeting into some semblance of order, and assured it that the agreement only applied to members of the rail and tramway services. 'Let's fight on,' cried a boilermaker, 'and pool the union funds to do so.' He moved that the strike committee resign, and a new one be appointed. He was ruled out of order. Mr. Dengate, secretary of the Amalgamated Society of Engineers, appealed to the men to accept the committee's decision. 'If you are not prepared to do as we advise,' he cried, 'carry on in the same senseless way as you hooted the president's remarks, and you will smash your movement and smash your unions by your folly!' (Applause.) Mr. T.G. Sinclair (Boilermakers' Union) caused a sensation by announcing that 'the boilermakers are not to take any notice of the Defence Committee's instruction to return to work until after the general meeting of the union, to be held to-morrow.' The president of the Boilermakers' Union (Mr. Boyd) contradicted the secretary's statement. Union members, he said, had placed themselves unreservedly in the hands of the Defence Committee. Uproar ensued. Insulting epithets were hurled across the hall, and Mr. Pagden, seeing the futility of endeavouring to proceed, announced the meeting closed. Three cheers were given, and, arguing among themselves, the men filed out without arriving at a decision.¹⁰²

An indication that it was not simply a noisy minority that was upset is Pagden's admission that if a motion in favour of returning to work had been put to the meeting it would have been defeated by about 4000 votes to 1000.¹⁰³ Not that this admission in any way altered the course that the officials of the ASE had chosen to adopt. The same issue of the *Telegraph* reported that the ASE officials had decided to instruct their members to report to work on the morning of Tuesday, 11 September. Pagden, the secretary of the ASE, contradicting without explanation his earlier

¹⁰² *Daily Telegraph*, 11 September 1917, p.5.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

admission that the vote to return would have been defeated, was described as saying that, ‘Whilst there was an element of dissatisfaction, the proposals for a resumption were generally accepted’.¹⁰⁴

A meeting of the ARTSA on the same day ‘carried an amendment asking the Defence Committee to “fight on”.’¹⁰⁵ Their executive ignored the vote:

The executive of the Amalgamated Railway and Tramway Service Association, which met again last night, has issued the following instructions to members: – The members of the Association are hereby instructed to report for duty at 7.30 a. m. on Tuesday, Sept. 11.¹⁰⁶

The Boilermakers’ Union, with the advantage of having a secretary who had broken ranks with the rest of the officials, voted not to return.¹⁰⁷

The opposition to the settlement, while widespread and vehement, was not, however, universal. The Blacksmiths’ Union voted unanimously to return. In contrast to the stormy reception the news of settlement received in Bathurst and Lithgow, in many of the country centres, such as Parkes and Tenterfield, the return was greeted with relief.¹⁰⁸ In Goulburn, despite ‘disappointment’ at the terms, a vote to return was carried.¹⁰⁹

The *Sun*, typically more sensitive to the nuances of opinion amongst the rank and file unionists made this comment on 10 September:

WHAT THE MEN THINK: Summed up briefly, the position of the men this afternoon, after they had time to discuss all the points of the situation is that they must return to work to-morrow. The men state that unless they return their strike pay will be stopped, and it is no use forming new committees, as they will not be recognised. The only thing they can do is to obey the Strike Committee and the executive of their unions.¹¹⁰

Another problem for the militants was that, with official sanction to return, they would be increasingly and rapidly isolated as their less militant workmates returned.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 September 1917, p.7.

¹⁰⁷ *Daily Telegraph*, 11 September 1917, p.5.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ *Sun*, 10 September 1917, p.5.

After reporting on the vote against the settlement at the ARTSA meeting, the *Telegraph* added:

It was asserted by many of the men that those who voted for the resumption of work would, in a good many instances, return to work to-day. It was also said that some of those who voted for the amendment [i.e. not to accept the settlement] would return to work.¹¹¹

While this prediction gives off more than a whiff of wish-fulfillment, it contains a germ of truth. Those who wished to return could do so with impunity as they had official support, and pressure would then be brought to bear on an ever-diminishing minority of militants. (This phenomenon is illustrated by Table 1, which shows the collapse of the strike between the 6 September and 13 September.)

There was, however, at least one more act in the drama, before a final collapse in the railway strike could occur. When strikers returned on 11 September, they were confronted with application forms, which read:

I hereby make application for re-employment in the Commissioners' service, and fully understand that if it be approved, it is on the condition that any re-employment will be governed by such directions as have been issued by the Commissioners in regards to grade, seniority and rates of pay.¹¹²

By forcing them to reapply for their jobs, the Railway Commissioners were making it clear that reinstatement was not automatic, that there would be victimisation and that the onus was on the victimised to prove why they should be rehired. The *Sun* described the reaction at Randwick:

The workers obeyed the instructions of their leaders almost to a man. Over 1000 put in an appearance before half-past 7, the time at which the whistle to start work blew, and a large number thought that they would merely have to sign on and resume work. Those workers had their lunch baskets with them...When the men were confronted with the notice telling them they would have to fill in application forms, which were posted in a prominent position near the 'bundy', they stood bewildered. It was a rude and unexpected shock, and the things said about the commissioners and the strike leaders could not be printed. For a while the men hung about in groups discussing the situation,

¹¹¹ *Daily Telegraph*, 11 September 1917, p.5.

¹¹² *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners' Advocate*, 11 October 1917, p.4.

and what they should do, 'We've been tricked,' they declared almost with one voice.¹¹³

At Eveleigh, there were similar scenes. More than 4,000 strikers applied for reinstatement,

but a large number of the men, principally engineers, moulders, and boiler-makers, took exception to the forms which they were instructed to fill in, and ...3000 of the men formed themselves into a procession and marched down Wilson-street, eventually congregating outside Trades Hall.¹¹⁴

In response the Defence Committee issued a statement expressing shock at the existence of the forms. The statement read:

Reports from various depots and workshops were received, and after consideration it was agreed that the attitude assumed by the Railway Department this morning showed a distinct breach of faith on behalf of those who had been negotiating with members of the Defence Committee. The general dissatisfaction expressed was mainly due to the fact that men were compelled to sign certain papers before being re-employed.¹¹⁵

If the members of the Defence Committee were genuinely shocked at the behaviour of the Commissioners then they were naïve indeed. They had, after all, given the Commissioners carte blanche 'to have discretion in filling all vacancies'. If, moreover, they genuinely wished to resist the forms, they had ruined the prospects of such resistance by sounding the retreat. In the country branches their members were returning, even at Eveleigh, 1,499 had signed the forms.¹¹⁶ At Randwick, management boasted that they now had enough men to function normally.¹¹⁷ At the Clyde Works the majority of the strikers returned.¹¹⁸ The boilermakers were holding out. The moulders now voted not to sign the form and obeyed the call as a body; the Ironworkers also voted solidly to continue the strike:

¹¹³ *Sun*, 11 October 1917, p.5.

¹¹⁴ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 September 1917, p.9.

¹¹⁵ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 September 1917, p.10.

¹¹⁶ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 September 1917, p.9.

¹¹⁷ *Sun*, 11 October 1917, p.5.

¹¹⁸ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 September 1917, p.9.

The Federated Iron-workers are determined to stand out until the conditions of employment are the same as prevailed on June 1 last; and, further, we shall remain solid with all fellow-unionists throughout the State until we have a written agreement from the Government that there will be no victimisation in their cases.¹¹⁹

Unfortunately for most of the other railway unions the strikers were now a minority of the most militant, and the fuss over the forms only helped identify to management more clearly who should be victimised. The Loco drivers were split over the decision. On 10 September a mass meeting voted 'by a large majority' to return to work.¹²⁰ The following day, however, a meeting initiated by militants repudiated the action of their executive committee in declaring the strike off without consulting the men by ballot as to their desires, and directed that

a deputation should be sent to the Transport Federation to ascertain if they would receive the Sydney branch of the L. E. F. and C. Association as co-operators in the continuance of the strike, and in this event the Sydney branch to ignore any further instructions from the executive during this industrial trouble.¹²¹

(The Transport Federation was, as we shall see, not a body set up in opposition to the Defence Committee, but represented simply a mutual defence pact by unions such as the seamen and the wharfies for whom a return was, as yet impractical). The *Sun* estimated the meeting as 200 strong, but the organisers of the meeting claimed that there were in fact 500 present.¹²² The *Herald* had earlier reported that, at Eveleigh: 'All the members of the Loco. Enginedrivers, Firemen and Cleaners' Association, however, signed the forms without any hesitation.'¹²³ However, this is explicable, as it is unlikely that any of the militants among the Loco men would have turned up to Eveleigh and, if only those who had voted to accept the agreement were there, it is not surprising that they would have all signed.

The reaction to the application forms meant that the ending of the railway strike was messy and drawn-out. It delayed the end, but there was no hope, once official sanction was given for anyone who wanted to return to work, of forestalling

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 September 1917, p.7.

¹²¹ *Sun*, 11 September 1917, p.5.

¹²² *Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 September 1917, p.10.

¹²³ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 September 1917, p.9.

the collapse. Lithgow voted to return on 11 September.¹²⁴ Bathurst remained defiant, as did Orange.¹²⁵ The following day ‘practically’ all of the railway and tramway strikers in Newcastle signed the forms.¹²⁶ The core of recalcitrance was Eveleigh, where as of 13 September, 2,170 had still refused to sign the forms.¹²⁷ At Bathurst, the engineers, the coachmakers, the boilermakers and the ARTSA held out, but on the 12 September the Loco branch, under the leadership of Ben Chifley, returned to work.¹²⁸ The strike collapsed that day in Goulburn as well.¹²⁹ By the 14 September, the total that had refused to sign the forms in the entire railway and tramway service was only 5,705. Of those who had signed, 8,255 had yet to be reemployed.¹³⁰ On 16 September meetings of the Ironworkers and Engineers resolved not to sign the forms but called for a return to work of all members on strike outside the railway service.¹³¹ By 19 September, however, they were forced to capitulate and voted to sign the forms. The following day the 300 members of the Boilermakers’ Union at Eveleigh marched back to work in a body.¹³² They, at least, had acted to the end in a disciplined and united manner. The railway strike was over.

The ending of the railway strike converted the Great Strike from an insurgent movement to a disorderly retreat. For some groups such as the Wonthaggi miners in Victoria, who were not faced with scabs, it meant that there was little impediment to a return to work. The Wonthaggi men returned on 9 September,¹³³ Broken Hill was also free from scabs, but the strikers there held out longer, concerned to support their fellow miners in the coal fields (who, as we shall see below, did face a problem with scabs). The Barrier miners voted to end their strike on 7 October,¹³⁴ though the return to work dragged on till 15 October, as the mines were not yet ready to resume,

¹²⁴ *Daily Telegraph* 12 September, p.8.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

¹²⁶ *Sun*, 12 September 1917, p.5.

¹²⁷ *Daily Telegraph* 13 September, p.5.

¹²⁸ *Daily Telegraph* 13 September, p.6.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*

¹³⁰ *Sun*, 14 September 1917, p.5.

¹³¹ *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners’ Advocate*, 17 September 1917, p.4.

¹³² *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners’ Advocate*, 20 September 1917, p.5.

¹³³ *Age*, 10 September 1917, p.6.

¹³⁴ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 October 1917, p.7: ‘The A.M.A., which controls the underground workers on the mines, declared the strike off yesterday morning. The meeting adjourned several times, and telegrams were read from Messrs. P. S. Brookfield M.L.A., and Messrs. Willis and Baddeley, secretary and president respectively of the Coal and Shale Workers’ Federation, advising the men to resume work. It was resolved: “That the strike be declared off, and that work be resumed under pre-strike conditions, and that members be requested to report any alteration in the conditions of labour to the A.M.A. office.”...Another largely-attended meeting of the A.M.A. was held this afternoon...After about an hour’s talk the men decided to sign on at the various mines to-morrow morning.’

presumably because they had been flooded.¹³⁵ For the wharfies, the ending of the railway strike simply meant a shift, from a strike in solidarity with the railway workers to a desperate struggle to enable a return to pre-strike conditions in the face of mass scabbing. Abandoned by the railway workers they had struck to support, they faced a future without preference and with a permanent presence of scabs, as many of the ‘volunteers’ on the waterfront declared their intention of staying. On 11 September they met in the basement of Trades Hall and voted to stay out. ‘As the men left the hall they called out “Will we go back?” That was followed by a thunderous “No!”’¹³⁶ Moves were made towards the formation of scab unions.¹³⁷ The hand of the employers was clear in this, at least in Melbourne, where a letter was sent to the Police Commissioner, requesting police attendance at meeting ‘of “National Service Volunteers” at Athenaeum Hall 8 o’clock, Sat night [15 September], to discuss the formation of a new Unionism [sic].’ The letter was sent on the letterhead of ‘J.B. Ellerker Pty Ltd, Shipowners, Shipping & customs agents, Ship Brokers, Timber Importers & Agents’.¹³⁸ The dockyards, Mort’s, Garden Island and Cockatoo Island, returned to work on 19 September.¹³⁹ These were relatively free of scabs, but their return further isolated the wharfies. Consequently, the Sydney wharfies also decided to return:

The wharf labourers, at a largely attended meeting in the Town Hall to-night decided to present themselves for work to-morrow. This decision, it was stated, will apply to about 10,000 men in the State. Mr. T. McCristal, president of the union, stated after the meeting, ‘We have decided that members of our federation shall present themselves for work to-morrow morning. We are making this recommendation to the branches of the Wharf Labourer’s Union throughout Australia, which represents nearly 20,000 men. By this action, we are showing we are prepared to end this dispute, and a

¹³⁵ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 October 1917, p.7: ‘The proprietary, as promised, resumed productive operations underground and on the surface to-day, and the men turned up in large numbers. Other mines took on more men, chiefly for preparatory and surface construction work. All the men applying for work were not taken on. Victimisation is alleged in the case of a couple of men who were not reinstated on the Junction North mine; and a special meeting of the A.M.A. has been called for to-morrow to consider this and other matters.’

¹³⁶ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 August 1917, p.7.

¹³⁷ Margo Beasley, *Wharfies: A History of the Waterside Workers’ Federation of Australia*, Sydney: Australian National Maritime Museum, 1996, p.52, lists three scab unions: ‘The Permanent & Casual Wharf Labourers’ Union’ in Sydney, the ‘Australian Ship & Wharf Workers’ Union’ in Melbourne, and the ‘Fremantle National Waterside Workers’ Union’.

¹³⁸ VPRS, Police Department, Inwards Correspondence, 807/P0000/626, File W9850, Letter, 13 September 1917.

¹³⁹ *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners’ Advocate*, 19 September 1917, p.5.

continuation of trouble on the waterfront now rests entirely with the shipowners.¹⁴⁰

They succeeded, however, only in turning the strike into a lockout as:

The wharf labourers offered for work to-day [20 September] but none was offered them...Mr. Woods, the union secretary, said that the men presented themselves for work this morning, and were informed that no unionists would be engaged.¹⁴¹

There were still, then, 4400 wharfies 'idle' in Sydney. They were only accepted back, on 22 October,¹⁴² to a waterfront where they had to accept the dribs and drabs of work that was left behind after the members of the new scab union, the 'Permanent and Casuals', had been assigned to their ships.

In Melbourne the situation facing the wharfies was just as dire. The 3,000 striking wharfies were faced with over 1,000 scabs working on the waterfront and many of these had signalled their wish to continue after the emergency and to remain permanently on the waterfront by forming a 'union' and registering with the Arbitration Commission. As the *Age* summed it up:

The free labourers, having formed and registered a union, are legally unionists. For the present, however, the wharf lumpers on strike refuse to work alongside them.¹⁴³

Late September saw a split in the ranks of the wharfies, as the Port Philip Stevedores - the more conservative of the two unions that made up the Melbourne section of the Waterside Workers' Federation - held a secret ballot of their members over a proposed return to work.¹⁴⁴ They voted to stay out, but another ballot held on 19 October¹⁴⁵ led to a resumption. It took the Stevedores, whose members included the foremen responsible for hiring crews, more than a week for them to actually resume.¹⁴⁶ During that week, an incident occurred that allowed, for the first time, the anger of the wharfies towards the scabs who had taken their jobs to boil over. On 24

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ *Sun*, 20 September 1917, p.5.

¹⁴² *Age*, 22 October 1917, p.8. This occurred after submitting to a secret ballot.

¹⁴³ *Age*, 11 September 1917, p.5.

¹⁴⁴ *Age*, 28 September 1917, p.7.

¹⁴⁵ *Age*, 20 October 1917, p.11.

¹⁴⁶ *Age*, 29 October 1917, p.8.

October, the Wharf Labourers' Union decided to test the suggestion of Justice Higgins that they should simply report *en masse* for work. The idea, no doubt, was that some at least would be rehired. Unfortunately, the union failed to notify any of the companies in advance of their intention, and the scab foremen, without any instructions to do otherwise, refused to hire any of the strikers. The result was an explosion of anger in which any unfortunate scabs who were within reach of the unionists were beaten 'with, fists, boots and lumps of coal'; the fighting continued into restaurants in Spencer Street.¹⁴⁷ The police reports of these events show a desire to downplay the violence portrayed in the Melbourne press. The police were sensitive to the accusation that they had failed to protect the loyalists, and the press was keen to sensationalise. The police admitted, however, that there was violence; they were simply keen to argue that it occurred outside their purview and to stress that there was little they could do about it, as the injured loyalists, concerned that their names would appear in the press, refused to lay charges or make statements.¹⁴⁸

There had already been outbreaks of violence in Melbourne in late September. It was then, as the strike was entering its final bitter stages, that the street agitation led by socialist women, in particular Adela Pankhurst and Jenny Baines, turned to window smashing. This was not only a protest of women against the high price of food, though that was the ostensible cause of the demonstrations. It was also a protest at the restrictions on free speech introduced mainly to silence Pankhurst's agitation,¹⁴⁹ and an opportunity to display the anger and frustration felt by working class communities at the mass scabbing and repression with which the strike had been met.¹⁵⁰ Not only women took part in the riots – most of the arrests were of men. One

¹⁴⁷ *Age*, 25 October 1917, p.5; *Argus*, 25 October 1917, p.5 described the incident as 'union terrorism'.

¹⁴⁸ VPRS, Police Department, Inwards, Correspondence, 807/P0000/624, File W9850, Sergeant Ainsworth, Report from Australian Wharf, 25 October 1917, is typical. He stated that there were two assaults: 'One of the assaults took place at No. 11 Shed, where four men only were employed...The police would have no knowledge of their presence there.' The other took place at Yarra Stevedore Co. Neither victim was willing to register an official complaint.

¹⁴⁹ VPRS, Police Department, Inwards Correspondence, 4723/P0000/499, File W9850, Memo: Inspecting Superintendent's Office 28 September 1917: 'The point has been raised whether the prohibition to Yarra Bank and other meetings, is intended to include meetings held on Sunday afternoons at the same place in Flinders Park...For instance Fleming's meeting might very well be prevented, but I am doubtful if for instance Miss Goldstein's gathering should be interfered with.' Note that middle class feminists, even when they were opposing the war and supporting the strike, were treated with a lighter touch than the working class anarchist, 'Chummy' Fleming.

¹⁵⁰ A good description of one of the riots can be found in: VPRS, Police Department, Inwards Correspondence, 807/P0000/624, File W9850, Report of Sub-Inspector Arthur 'Re. disturbance at Richmond', 24 September 1917: 'I took charge of the police at Richmond Town Hall and Bridge St but there was no necessity for police interference. Miss Pankhurst did not attend the meeting. About 9

significant target was the Dunlop factory, which had replaced most of its workplace with scabs. A policeman described the group that attacked Dunlop. He met them at 11 pm, after they had left Dunlop and were marching along the Yarra, and arrested two of their number, Harold Walter Porter and Percy John Cornish, for 'riotous behaviour' at No. 7 South Wharf South Melbourne.

These two men were marching with a crowd of several hundred people towards the City after having done considerable damage to the glass windows at Dunlop works and street lamps in the vicinity and when opposite No. 7 South Wharf the accused Porter and Cornish left the crowd and jumping up on the Wharf where a number of empty beer barrels were stocked commenced rolling them across the Wharf towards the River.¹⁵¹

Whether interpreted as larrikin licence (rolling beer barrels into the Yarra) or as an expression of anger and bitterness towards scabs, these manifestations of violence appear more as evidence of a movement in retreat than the earlier mass protests attempting to storm Parliament. After the riot on 24 October, the wharfies began to gather on a vacant lot opposite the Yarra Stevedoring Company's bureau in a last ditch attempt to intimidate the 'volunteers'.¹⁵² The Melbourne wharf labourers, staring down the scabs from their vacant lot, were now completely alone; the last group of strikers left in either state, and it was clear that they could not hold out for much longer. In the end, they held out longer than anyone might have predicted. It was not till 4 December that a mass meeting of the wharf labourers 'narrowly' voted to return to work.¹⁵³

In the case of the Seamen's Union, scabbing was the least of its problems. Divisions between the rank and file and some of the junior officials on the one hand,

o'clock word was received that a number of people had left the "Yarra Bank" and were making towards Richmond thinking they could come through the parks on to Bridge Road mounted men went to intercept them, but they came along Swan St, and were met by the police and scattered here, about 9 plate glass windows had small holes pierced through them as if of small pieces of road metal or round bullets some of the latter were found and no doubt been used as a sling shot. After they were scattered here, they again collected in Church street and started for Bridge Rd to the Town Hall where the meeting was in progress but both mounted and footmen charged them and in a determined manner broke them up before they reached Bridge street. The only damage done in Bridge Rd. was at [Stickingo?] Drapers shop where a small hole was made in two windows. The crowd that was gathered and scattered in Church St was fully a thousand strong. Three (3) arrests were made for window breaking and offensive behaviour. Two of the men arrested were carrying red flags (new) and are held by the police.'

¹⁵¹ VPRS, Police Department Correspondence, 807/P0000/626, File W9850, Report of Constable John Birrell, 25 September 1917.

¹⁵² *Age*, 26 October 1917, p.7.

¹⁵³ *Age*, 5 December 1917, p.6.

and the national officials on the other, were deepened by the strike. The hostility of the federal officials to the strike activity of their members is evidenced in a series of extraordinary confrontations with their rank and file, and with some of the state-level officials in NSW and Victoria. The dramatic saga, outlined in Chapter Three, of the virtual kidnapping of General Secretary Cooper by a group of seamen led by a junior state official, William Daly, was only the beginning. The strike thus began in NSW with an ‘unconstitutional’ mass meeting and spread to Brisbane on the apparent misunderstanding that there was an official strike. In Melbourne, there was no mass meeting, constitutional or otherwise. The seamen simply walked off their ships rather than help scabs to unload them.

The Seamen’s Union was, at this time, very much to the right within the labour movement. Its officials had followed a jingoistic pro-war line, although they joined with the rest of the movement in opposing conscription. This was especially the case with regards to the dominant trio of federal officials, Guthrie, Cooper and Charles Burke, who are described by Fitzpatrick and Cahill as ‘representing a centralised control system within the union and a conservative section of the labour movement as a whole.’¹⁵⁴ The Melbourne officials, too, were industrially conservative. As we saw in Chapter Three, they opposed joining the strike in August; in Melbourne it began through individual walkouts – ship by ship. They did, however, resent the centralised control of the federal officials mentioned in the quote above, and divisions between Melbourne and Sydney would widen into a chasm during the course of the dispute.

A useful indicator of the federal officials’ politics is their attitude to the IWW. In January of 1917, the IWW Twelve languished in gaol, victims of a vicious frame-up that was already a *cause celebre*. They had attracted the support of significant sections of the labour movement, which had begun, regardless of their differences with the ‘Wobblies’, a campaign for their release.¹⁵⁵ Indifferent to this, the Seamen’s Union journal carried an article that described the IWW as ‘made up of the scum and

¹⁵⁴ Fitzpatrick & Cahill, *The Seamen’s Union of Australia*, p.39. Their tenure dated back to a reorganisation of the union in 1906, making them prime examples of the arbitration generation of officials. Guthrie is described by Fitzpatrick and Cahill as the federal president, and Burke as the secretary of the Queensland branch. By 1917, Burke appears to have replaced Guthrie as President (he is described as such in press reports – though they often spell his name as ‘Bourke’).

¹⁵⁵ Ian Turner, *Sydney’s Burning*, Melbourne: Heinemann, 1967, relates the story of their frame-up, and the campaign to free them.

tailings that have been spued [sic] out of the Labor Movement'.¹⁵⁶ Industrially, the officials' failure to deal with a variety of members' grievances during the war is identified by Turner as the underlying cause of the great seamen's strike of 1919.¹⁵⁷ They were to lose control of the union in 1918 at both federal and state levels to a team led by the proto-communist (and partner of Adela Pankhurst), Tom Walsh, in 1918. It is not unreasonable to speculate that the rank and file of the union – and, as the example of Daly would indicate, some lower level officials – were already discontented with their official leadership by 1917.

Whatever their opinion of their officials, however, what is clear is the willingness of the seamen on the east coast to defy those officials by going on strike, and the officials were, at first, disarmed and confused. On 27 August, the Seamen's Union president, Burke, appeared before Justice Higgins requesting a variation in the Award. Higgins grilled him about the strike:

Burke: Our union has no quarrel with the shipowners.

Higgins: All the more reason for your members not refusing work.

Burke: Our members are on the horns of a dilemma. They are mixed up with the disputes of others.¹⁵⁸

Burke continued later:

Burke: Our men gave the necessary notice.

Higgins: Did they give notice only after they had been asked to work cargo?

Burke: I do not know.¹⁵⁹

Burke's confusion runs counter to the enthusiasm and determination of the crews on the large interstate steamers, which remained stranded in port for the duration of the strike.

One area where the seamen's strike did not bite was the coastal shipping sector. In Queensland this was a deliberate decision made by the seamen:

During the earlier stages of the strike the seamen left the ships as soon as they arrived in port, but now the trouble is apparently being confined to steamers trading from one State to another in Australia. This means that vessels

¹⁵⁶ UMA, Seamen's Union papers, 87/125, *The Australasian Seamen's Journal*, 1 January 1917.

¹⁵⁷ Turner, *Industrial labour and politics*, p.184.

¹⁵⁸ *Age*, 28 August 1917, p.5.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

engaged solely in the coastal trade of Queensland will not be interfered with.¹⁶⁰

This decision may have been due to the fact that Queensland had a Labor government, combined with the desire to restrict the impact of strike action to NSW. It also helped that the Brisbane wharfies were not on strike and that, therefore, they were not faced with the unpalatable choice of striking or dealing with scabs. But even in NSW, where there was no such decision to exempt coastal services, there are reports in the press throughout the strike of coastal services running successfully to both the north and south coasts. So that, for instance, a celebratory meeting was held on the small steamer, *Brundah*, with 'the Mayor of Lismore presiding' to celebrate its arrival in town with 'seven captains among the crew'.¹⁶¹ In any case, it was always going to be easier to keep smaller ships running with skeleton and/or 'volunteer' crews, whether or not these were composed of 'captains' or more ordinary mortals. In any case, the smaller coastal ships were inevitably less well unionised than the larger interstate steamers.

On 15 August a special conference of federal ministers, presided over by Hughes, passed a regulation under the War Precautions Act making it illegal 'to interfere, or to dissuade or influence loyal citizens from engaging in the discharge, loading, coaling and despatch of ships'.¹⁶² Given that Robinson and Daly were already on charge for conspiracy, this extra repressive legislation was perhaps unnecessary. The following day, 16 August, saw meetings in Sydney of the Marine Officers and of the Merchant Services Guild (the representative body of ships' captains and mates). Both declared support for the government. Soon after, the Sydney *Sun* was delighted to report an offer of help from the quaintly named 'Ancient Mariners' Society':

Among the offers of help is one from members of the Ancient Mariners' Society. A meeting, at which the offer was made, was summoned by a quaintly worded circular, which began, 'Dear Old Barnacle, - Times are stirring, and likely to be more so. It behoves us to get off the rocks and do something. Catch hold and heave together.'¹⁶³

¹⁶⁰ *Daily Telegraph*, 18 August 1917, p.9.

¹⁶¹ *Daily Telegraph*, 20 August 1917, p.6.

¹⁶² *Sun*, 15 August 1917, p.5.

¹⁶³ *Sun*, 19 August 1917, p.5.

There was some variation however, within this chorus of loyalty. The officials of the Merchant Service Guild, which organised ships officers, saw their organisation as a union (albeit a respectable one) and had managed to secure an award. This award included a clause stating that officers on ships would not be compelled to do manual labour. This would rule out any of their members doing the work of skilled seamen – such as, for instance, operating winches. This was crucial to any attempt to organise strikebreaking on the ships. On 20 August, a stormy meeting overturned the officials' attempts to hold the line on this issue. Like Cooper they were faced with an insurrectionary membership. In this case, however, the insurrection was from the right. The 'rank and file' of the officers overturned their officials, establishing their determination, not just to do their own work, but also to scab on the seamen.¹⁶⁴

Scabbing by their officers was less of a threat to the ongoing organisation of the Seamen's Union than the massive influx of volunteers onto the wharves represented to the wharfies. The officers, after all, would not replace the seamen once they returned after the strike. There was some recruitment of volunteers for ships, but it was on a comparatively small scale. Tasmania was given priority for what crews could be scraped together. The *Oonah* was being prepared for a voyage with a volunteer crew as early as late August.¹⁶⁵ Another steamer left Sydney for Launceston at the end of August.¹⁶⁶ Otherwise, any volunteers with maritime skills were assigned to smaller ships for the coastal trade, thereby keeping alive the vital trade in coal from Newcastle and Wollongong to Sydney.¹⁶⁷ The daily Sydney papers predicted the imminent dispatch of interstate ships throughout August and September, but none appear to have sailed.¹⁶⁸ As late as the first week of September ships were reported as arriving and their crews as walking off.¹⁶⁹ The *Sun* stated as late as 19

¹⁶⁴ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 August 1917, p.6.

¹⁶⁵ *Age*, 24 August 1917, p.8.

¹⁶⁶ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 31 August 1917, p.8.

¹⁶⁷ *Illawarra Mercury*, p.4, 24 August 1917, for instance, relates that a ship crewed by volunteers discharged a general cargo at Wollongong the previous day. More generally, the *Sun*, 26 August 1917, p.2, could only speculate that: 'Arrangements are almost complete for the despatch of one vessel early in the coming week, the men being provided by more than one line'. It could, however, state on a firmer basis that: 'No difficulty has been experienced in obtaining the services of crews to work the small colliers in the trade between Newcastle and Sydney'.

¹⁶⁸ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 5 September 1917, p.10, reports the sailing of the *Southborough* with an interstate crew.

¹⁶⁹ See, for instance, *Daily Telegraph*, 1 September 1917, p.9, 'The crew of another steamer was paid off yesterday, and the liner has joined the fleet of idle tonnages at port. Owing to the restrictions of coal supplies and the unrest among the seamen it has been decided that as work on each of the inter-State boats in port is completed they shall remain idle. Also, *Daily Telegraph*, 8 September 1917, p.10, reports that the *Zealandia* joined the 'fleet of idle tonnage'.

September that: 'It is more than five weeks since an Inter-State passenger ship left this port, and no one can yet give any idea as to when one will get away.'¹⁷⁰

The decision of the seamen to remain on strike after 9 September was, then, an admirable display of solidarity. A mass meeting of seamen in Sydney on 10 September voted to work with the other transport unions (most particularly, with the wharfies).¹⁷¹ As the wharfies could not return to a waterfront full of scabs, this meant remaining on strike. They held this position throughout September. What kept them from immediately returning was loyalty to the wharfies, in support of whom they had initially struck. By the end of September, however, this display of solidarity was being placed under strain. It was in this final phase of the strike that the divisions already evident in the union over the strike became irreconcilable. The federal Secretary, Cooper, was hardly likely to be working to hold the line given his behaviour earlier in the strike. The minutes of the Steamship Owners' Federation record that as early as 16 August:

It was reported that Mr. Cooper had visited the various Companies at Sydney and had intimated that the railway strike would probably collapse shortly and the seamen would be prepared to go back if payment were made for the time they have been on strike.¹⁷²

The officials of the Melbourne branch had, at the beginning of the strike, complained to the press about the lack of information from the federal executive in Sydney. This was to be a recurring theme during the strike and was reiterated in a report produced by the Melbourne Branch in 1918.¹⁷³ Cooper's first appearance in Melbourne in late August met hostility:

Mr. Cooper...received a stormy reception at a meeting of the Victorian branch to-night. His intimation that the men might have to stay out for 15 to 18 weeks was received with uproar, strong dissent being shown. The opinion was expressed by many speakers that without funds the strike could not last, allusion being made to the differential treatment accorded Sydney seamen, where financial assistance was available for the men out. Mr. Cooper was

¹⁷⁰ *Sun*, 19 September 1917, p.6.

¹⁷¹ *Sun*, 10 September, p.5; *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners' Advocate*, 11 September 1917, p.4; *Daily Telegraph*, 11 September 1917, p.6.

¹⁷² ANU, NBA, Minutes of Australasian Steamship Owners' Federation, E217/6, 16 August 1917.

¹⁷³ Copies of this report are no longer traceable in any archive. It is however paraphrased, and (in part) quoted in Fitzpatrick & Cahill, *The Seamen's Union of Australia*, p.44-6.

heckled on account of having travelled from Sydney in a 'scab' train, and his intrusion into local strike affairs was resented by a number of members.¹⁷⁴

The hostility to Cooper on this occasion appears to be based on a grab bag of local grievances that could be directed both by militants and moderates. For instance, the Victorian branch report quoted by Fitzpatrick and Cahill, produced in the aftermath of the strike, somewhat inaccurately described the dispute as being foisted upon them by the federal officials.¹⁷⁵ Later, however, the hostility of the Melbourne Branch was to come more clearly from the left.

By early October, the resolve of the striking seaman had begun to crack, and their federal officials began making moves to engineer a return to work. On 3 October the Australasian Steamship Owners' Federation turned down the request of the union for a conference to negotiate a return to work.¹⁷⁶ In Newcastle that same day the strike began to break as forty striking seamen signed on for work on interstate steamers.¹⁷⁷ On 5 October the *Newcastle Advocate* reported the news of the union's decision to return on the employers' terms:

'Strike will be declared off on Saturday.' This was an official notification posted at the Newcastle office of the Federated Seamen's Union yesterday afternoon, and the announcement will come as a relief to the waiting crews and to the shipping community generally. For the past few days the seamen have been in a state of uncertainty as to how to act, and the filling up of certain interstate boats within the past couple of days has caused much concern in their ranks...When the men quitted their ships several weeks ago they left comfortable berths, and the relations had been of such an amicable character that they were loth [sic.] to lose their former jobs. The prospect of finding their positions jumped was galling, but with the union stamp now placed on their return, there will be a filling up of crews of the interstate vessels, which have been hung up so long.¹⁷⁸

In Melbourne, the decision to return to work was initially accepted and crews duly reported to the ships they had previously abandoned. There was, however, a problem. The seamen in Melbourne apparently expected that, as the preference clause in their Award had not been cancelled, they would all be rehired. This caused an immediate

¹⁷⁴ *Daily Telegraph*, 28 August 1917, p.6.

¹⁷⁵ Fitzpatrick & Cahill, *Seamen's Union of Australia*, p.44.

¹⁷⁶ *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners' Advocate*, 4 October 1917, p.5; *Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 October 1917, p.7.

¹⁷⁷ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 October 1917, p.8.

¹⁷⁸ *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners' Advocate*, 5 October 1917, p.4.

problem when the men reported for work on the steamer *Oonah*. As a regular on the Tasmanian run, the *Oonah* had been operating with a crew of volunteers, and seventeen of these wished to continue as firemen.¹⁷⁹ This meant that the seventeen men they had replaced were now not wanted. For the Melbourne seamen, unlike their NSW counterparts, working with scabs was still unacceptable; they walked out again. The Steamship Owners' Federation met the following day and immediately cabled its branches throughout the country to impose a retaliatory lockout.¹⁸⁰

The response of the Sydney branch to this lockout was an astonishing betrayal of their Melbourne comrades. There were signs already in September that the officials in Sydney were beginning to regain the upper hand over the militants in the branch. In a meeting of the union in Sydney on 24 September, a seaman who was accused of being an IWW sympathiser was ejected from the meeting and beaten up.¹⁸¹ In early October, the *Age* commented on the bitterness felt by Victorian seamen towards the Sydney executive over the cessation of strike pay:

Many seamen, it will be recalled, took individualistic action, in opposition to the advice of their officials. Others were 'paid off'. The position, the officials claim now, is that the seamen are not officially on strike, and that they have no alternative but to return to work when berths are offered. To emphasise this point of view the relief money paid out to many seamen has, it is reported, been stopped. The position thus created had provoked a pronounced split in the union ranks, since a considerable proportion of the seamen is [sic] anxious to continue to stand out in support of the wharf labourers.¹⁸²

With Cooper now leading the debate, rather than playing the role of a hapless victim in the hands of his insurgent members, the NSW Branch offered to break the strike of the Melbourne Branch in order to end the lockout.

¹⁷⁹ *Daily Telegraph*, 3 September 1917, p.6, 'The volunteer crew of the steamer *Oonah*, which reached Melbourne to-day, three hours behind scheduled time, experienced a very uncomfortable passage on the trip from Tasmania.'

¹⁸⁰ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 October 1917, p.11, 'The following telegram has been sent to branches of the Commonwealth Steamship Owners' Federation in all ports of Australia, and to officials of the Federated Seamen's Union: "As Seamen's Union will not provide less than a whole crew for the *Oonah*, and this vessel is manned by volunteer firemen, some of whom wish to remain in employment, members have decided not to engage members of the Seamen's Union until the *Oonah* is manned, and to discharge all union men who have been engaged. No steamers are to leave port until the Seamen's Union is prepared to provide men who will work along with any labour employed by ship-owners, whether ashore or afloat.'"

¹⁸¹ *Sun*, 24 September 1917, p.2.

¹⁸² *Age*, 3 October 1917, p.7.

A mass meeting of members [of the Seamen's Union], numbering several thousand, was held in the Sydney Town Hall yesterday afternoon, when the position created by the Victorian branch in refusing to man the steamer Oonah was discussed. A section of the meeting was desirous of falling into line with their Victorian confreres, whose numbers are very insignificant as compared with the membership of the Sydney branch. The officials of the union pointed out the foolishness of this attitude. A motion was carried re-affirming the resolution to return to work...The secretary (Mr. Cooper) was also instructed to proceed to Melbourne immediately and explain the position to the Victorian unionists. If the Victorian members are not prepared to fall into line with the decision of the Sydney branch the latter will take the matter into their own hands. It is understood that the Sydney branch will take steps to find men for the Oonah if the Victorians still persist in refusing to supply a crew.¹⁸³

Consequently, Cooper made his second trip to Melbourne, addressing a meeting there on 15 October. Along with Burke, the federal president, and Neil, the president of the Sydney branch, he addressed a meeting of 700 Melbourne seamen at the Socialist Hall in Exhibition Street. The following description of what occurred when a federal official of a union took the extraordinary step of informing his members that he was going to arrange to break their strike is worth citing at length.

From the very outset the meeting was determined not to hear Mr. Cooper, who had come from Sydney to urge the Melbourne branch to fall in with the views of the steamship owners and provide crews for the Oonah and the Goulburn. No sooner had he started to speak but hooting commenced. Every time there was a brief respite Mr. Cooper managed to get a few words of his ultimatum to the meeting. The gathering got almost out of hand, unionists standing on the chairs and boo-hoing and hurling all sorts of threats and invitations to Mr. Cooper. Strong exception was taken by the meeting that they should man the Oonah. Eventually a motion, which was interpreted as a vote of no confidence in the executive, was agreed to.

In the course of his remarks Mr. Cooper mentioned that the alternative to accepting his proposition was the probable manning of the Oonah by Sydney men. The militant section of the crowd passed strong criticisms of the executive in Sydney. It is stated that the local secretary, Mr. Gibson, participated in the condemnation of the attitude of the Federal Executive.

When Mr. Cooper left the meeting the hostility towards him became very pronounced. He was followed from the building by over 200 men along Exhibition-street, to continuous hooting and yelling from the mob. As he turned into Bourke-street one of the wildest spirits dashed from the vanguard and dealt him a severe blow behind the ear. Mr. Cooper declined to retaliate, and proceeded into Bourke-street, but as his passage was blocked he eventually escaped in the direction of Parliament.¹⁸⁴

¹⁸³ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 October 1917, p.13.

¹⁸⁴ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 October 1917, p.7.

Why had the Sydney Branch moved so dramatically to the right, while the Melbourne Branch, derided as one of the least organised branches of the union, stayed steadfast? One explanation was provided by an anonymous official in Sydney:

One prominent official [of the Seamen's Union] said that the actions of the Victorians was [sic] rather humorous, as they were never looked upon as staunch unionists. Now they objected to work alongside loyalists, and no doubt the trouble was being prolonged by many of the malcontents in the Sydney branch who had gone over to Victoria. It had been stated on good authority that the Victorian strikers were being supplied daily with hot meals, and their boots repaired free of charge. The official added if this were true he did not know where the funds were coming from. No doubt, as long as these things were provided free of charge, many of the men who did not like work at any time would be only too pleased to see the trouble prolonged.¹⁸⁵

Behind the crude spin about militants being work-shy and the implication of sinister forces behind the provision of boots, some elements of this explanation are plausible. We know, for instance, that the Women's Political Association had turned Guild Hall, their headquarters in Swanston Street in Melbourne, into a food co-operative to aid the strikers.¹⁸⁶ No such level of support existed in Sydney. And, even if it did, there would have been more demand for the support, given the greater numbers of strikers than in Melbourne. The allegation that militants had fled Sydney for the more congenial environment of Melbourne may also be true, though it is hard to imagine how they would have travelled without trains or ships. One can hardly blame them for fleeing a branch where an allegation of being an IWW sympathiser might lead to a thumping.

The position of the Victorian officials is more of a conundrum. At the beginning of the strike they seemed to be more determined to stop (or at least more successful in stopping) strike action than the officials in Sydney. Now, however, they were siding with their members against Cooper. By 1919, the officials of the Melbourne Branch supported the revolutionary, Tom Walsh (who in the intervening period had taken over the Sydney Branch), in his successful bid for national leadership of the union.¹⁸⁷ By then Cooper had departed for a government position, an

¹⁸⁵ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 18 October 1917, p.7.

¹⁸⁶ See Chapter Three, above, note 97. Guild Hall is now Storey Hall, part of the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology.

¹⁸⁷ Fitzpatrick & Cahill, *Seamen's Union of Australia*, p. 50.

escape prefigured in his earlier flight from the angry mob of Melbourne seamen towards Parliament. His anointed successor, W.H. Edwards, was defeated in the ensuing election by Walsh.¹⁸⁸ In any case, free boots or no free boots, the Melbourne Branch could not hold out for long. They had expressed their anger at Cooper. With the hated General Secretary now safely out of Melbourne, they held a meeting on 18 October and voted to return.

The other group of workers facing a problem with scabbing was the coal miners. The coal strike was, arguably, the most important strategic contest in the whole conflict, and is dealt with in detail below in Chapter Six. It suffices here to note the level of concern by the government with the power of the coal miners and its determination to defeat them; the victory of the miners in the 1916 strike still smarted. In order to introduce scabs into the mines it had first been necessary to amend the Coal Mines Act, which restricted the use of unskilled labour in the mines. This was achieved early in the strike. Despite initial assurances from the government that it was not yet considering employing ‘volunteers’, it was clear that it had every intention to do so. As the *Sun* reported on 17 August:

The Government, according to a statement by the Acting-Premier, Mr. Fuller, does not intend to avail itself at once of the powers conferred upon it by the new Coal Mines Bill. Asked whether the Government had any volunteers for working the coal mines, he replied, ‘Yes. We have volunteers for everything!’ Mr. Fuller explained that it was not intended at present to put free labor into the collieries. The bill, which would be passed by the Council to-night, was merely an emergency measure. There would be plenty of places, he added, which could be worked by any body of men with absolute safety.¹⁸⁹

On 22 August the Chief Inspector of Mines, Mr. Humble, produced a report for the Acting Premier which identified the mines that could most effectively be worked by unskilled ‘volunteer’ labour. These were mostly tunnel mines with smaller seams; large seams required too much skill to work as once the coal was removed it left a large space that had to be propped up. He particularly recommended the Wallarah mine at Catherine Hill Bay south of Newcastle and the Invincible colliery at Cullen Bullen, near Lithgow. The advantages of these two collieries were their easy working and their location. Wallarah was ‘isolated from other mining centres’ and

¹⁸⁸ Ibid. Walsh polled 1,294 against 1,213 for Edwards.

¹⁸⁹ *Sun*, 17 August 1917, p.5.

Invincible was 'located in a very thinly populated area and I question very much whether the whole of the employees live about the mine'.¹⁹⁰ The first contingent of volunteers arrived at Wallarah on 26 August.¹⁹¹ By early September a number of mines were operating at limited capacity with NSW volunteers and two collieries on the Maitland field, Richmond Main and Pelaw Main, had been taken over by the Victorian Government and supplied with Victorian scabs protected by Victorian police.

A small, yet poignant, example of the depths to which the Government, at both state and federal levels, was willing to descend is provided by the saga of the miners' route march. Throughout August the Sydney press reported the novel idea of some of the South Coast miners to stage a route march into Sydney. The *Sun*, for instance, on 21 August reported that:

At a combined meeting held at Thirroul this morning of miners and railway men it was decided to organise a route march from Wollongong to Sydney tomorrow week, picking up all miners and railway men en route. On arrival in Sydney a deputation will wait on the Acting Premier and ask him to resign, as he no longer retains the confidence of the people.¹⁹²

The *Sydney Morning Herald* on 25 August added:

The miner's route march from the South Coast is creating great interest, and plenty of enthusiasm is being put into the movement. The main object of the march is to approach the Government as a deputation with an appeal to have the amendment of the Coal Mines Regulation Act removed, and the withdrawal of the charges against the Labour leaders.¹⁹³

The march did not receive universal approval. The *Sun* reported that the Mount Keira miners voted against supporting it.¹⁹⁴ The *Herald*, however, pointed out on 27 August that:

Although opinion is divided as to the necessity for a miners' route march to Sydney, the organisers are addressing meetings throughout the district and urging all who possibly can to fall in and swell the crowd in the tramp to the

¹⁹⁰ NSA, 9/4748, Premier's Department, Inwards Correspondence, Report of Chief Inspector of Mines, 22 August 1917.

¹⁹¹ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 August 1917, p.8.

¹⁹² *Sun*, 21 August 1917, p.5.

¹⁹³ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 25 August 1917, p.12.

¹⁹⁴ *Sun*, 25 August 1917, p.5.

city. As the arrangements now stand, the procession will be headed by the Corrimal brass band, starting from Wollongong at 10 a.m. on Wednesday [29 August].¹⁹⁵

This report, however, is the last mention in the press of the route march. We may never know for certain if any march actually went ahead. The reason for the silence of the press is hinted at by a telegram sent by the NSW Attorney General Hall, to Prime Minister Hughes on 27 August:

IWW and others arranging route march this week from South Coast. Success depends entirely upon publicity. You will greatly assist by instructing censor to forbid all references to route march in New South Wales press.¹⁹⁶

An oral history transcript in the National Library, recorded in the late 1980s, provides an intriguing hint that the march may well have occurred, despite the press blackout. Aida Salmon was a young shop assistant in suburban Sydney whose only consciousness of the strike was that she and a friend thought it great fun to be given a lift to work each day on a horse drawn trolley. Later she was to marry a miner from the South Coast and, during the Depression, became a communist. That is perhaps why she remembered the sight that greeted the two young women one day as they waited for their lift:

...while we were waiting another day when the strike must have been over, there was the miners come. We were waiting for the tram and coming up was the miners marching. And they were all black and everybody, women and everybody, was marching.¹⁹⁷

If this was indeed the route march, then her belief that the strike ‘must have been over’ was mistaken. The miners were not willing at first to return, until the amendments to the act were repealed. They wanted the scabs out of the mines. By early October, the leadership of the Miners’ Union concluded that they had no chance of forcing the Government’s hand and that they had sufficient support in the lodges to

¹⁹⁵ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 August 1917, p.8.

¹⁹⁶ NSA, Premier’s Department, Inwards Correspondence, 9/4747, telegram from Hall to Hughes, 27 August 1917.

¹⁹⁷ NLA, Oral TRC 2301, NSW Bicentennial oral history collection, INT. 97, Interview with Aida Salmon.

affect a return. The coal strike officially ended by 5 October,¹⁹⁸ though the Maitland miners, who had suffered most from scabbing (Richmond Main, for instance, was now staffed with a full complement of Victorian scabs), held out in defiance of their executive till 15 October.¹⁹⁹ The Maitland miners, the Melbourne seamen and the Melbourne wharfies were the last major groups of strikers to return. When the Melbourne Wharf Labourers reported for duty on 5 December the Great Strike was finally over.

The unwinding of the strike action had been a piecemeal and disorderly affair and the defeat was bitter. The labour movement had entered in 1916 a new and different phase where the patient accumulation of forces and dogged pursuit of minor gains through arbitration gave way to an aggressive pursuit of more substantial gains through direct action. At the base of the movement the enthusiasm for direct action was great and the rapid spread of the strike in 1917 is testament to the almost insurrectionary spirit of many workers. The failure of the strike, and the inability to react with any strategic or tactical sense when faced with a united response from federal and state governments and with a mobilisation of key elements of the rural population and of the middle class, betrays the movement's immaturity. That immaturity was most evident in the leadership of the movement – a leadership increasingly at odds with the newfound militancy of the rank and file. The next chapter will attempt an analysis of why that leadership failed.

¹⁹⁸ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 October, p.8, reported that the Lithgow miners returned on 3 October; *Sydney Morning Herald*, 5 October, p.7, reported all mines on the South Coast working except Helensburgh which was 'not ready'; *Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 October 1917, p.14: 'All the collieries in the Newcastle district, with the exception of one or two small mines, were working to-day.'

¹⁹⁹ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 October 1917, p.7.

Chapter Five – A Failure of leadership?

*I know my arbitration act
Like a sailor knows his “riggings”,
So if you want a small advance
I’ll talk to Justice ’iggins’¹*

Regardless of whether defeat was inevitable (a question addressed in the next chapter) it is clear that the leadership of the trade unions during the Great Strike was unprepared for a struggle of this scale. Most did not want to strike, but their attempts to prevent it were unsuccessful. All they achieved was some limitation of the strike’s extent and some retardation of the speed with which it spread. None of this assuaged the anger of governments, state and federal, nor did it serve to mollify the severity with which they responded. Indeed, it is hard not to have some sympathy for the unfortunate E.J. Kavanagh, arrested and charged with inciting a strike he had attempted to prevent. The main impact of their ambivalence on the strike was to limit its effect, to constrain the energy of the rank and file, and to prepare the way for eventual capitulation on 9 September.

The extent of this strike – the number of unions, and, consequently, of officials involved – made it something of a litmus test for the politics and the mettle of the leadership of the Australian labour movement. The unanimity of the reactions of officials as diverse as Willis of the Coal Miners and Cooper of the Seamen, one a Ruskin College educated Marxist, the other an openly careerist and patriotic right-winger, is telling. There were differences in their behaviour. Cooper made little attempt to hide his hostility to the strike, and was willing to organise scabbing to break the resistance of the Melbourne Branch of his union. Once his members had forced his hand, Willis worked tirelessly to make the strike effective, and when, as the time came to end it, he was faced with a similar rebellion by the miners in the Maitland District, he responded with argument rather than bureaucratic manoeuvres. Yet both were forced to endorse the strike by their members against their better judgement. Both were unwilling to take a lead in spreading the strike beyond New South Wales. Both, whatever their politics, were *industrially* to the right of the bulk of their members. The question, which arises from this curious unanimity across the political spectrum, is whether the behaviour of the officials was simply a product of

¹ IWW song cited in H. V. Evatt, *William Holman: Australian Labour Leader*, Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1979, p.165.

their individual political positions and industrial experience or whether there is a systematic sociological basis to their industrial conservatism.

The analysis of a trade union bureaucracy, distinct from and yet connected to the working class, has a long history. The identification of this social layer as a brake upon the insurgent spirit of the working class is not confined to the classical Marxist tradition. A similar analysis and identification has been made by figures as diverse as C. Wright Mills and Robert Michels.² The Marxist tradition has remained, however, the most influential on labour historiography, especially in Great Britain and the U.S.

There are a number of different strands to this analysis. One begins with the apparently straightforward observation that union officials are, more often than not, not workers. The bourgeoisie does not employ them and they are not exploited. As a result, their relationship to the means of production is different from that of the workers they represent. This has a number of obvious ramifications. Viewed exclusively from the point of view of their material interests, the difference between officials and their members is clear. They do not, for instance, experience the working conditions of their members: they are not in danger of dying from industrial accidents; they do not have to go down a mine nor endure the tedium of an assembly line. Nor will they suffer if their members' wages are cut, except inasmuch as this affects the revenue of the union. All these things matter to the officials, but they matter at an inevitable remove. That which affects the rank and file affects the interests of the officials only to the extent that it affects the union machine upon which those officials depend for their livelihood, their power and their prestige.

This strand of analysis has obvious relevance for the giant unions in the U.S. and extreme examples can be found there: John L. Lewis of the United Coalminers swigging champagne and smoking cigars at elite parties, gangster officials of the Teamsters playing fast and loose with the millions of their members' pensions funds. A press report from Atlantic City in 1910 is a classic illustration of this phenomenon:

Engaged in a game of baseball in his bathing suit with President Sam Gompers, Secretary Frank Morrison and other leaders of the A.F.L. on the beach this morning, John Mitchell, former head of the mine workers' union,

² Mills & Schneider, *The new men of power, America's labor leaders*; Michels, *Political Parties*. Michels, unlike Mills, who saw the restraining influence of officials on the rank and file as salutary, did not view his famous 'iron law of oligarchy' as positive. Nevertheless his pessimistic and a-historical concept helped pave the way for other non-Marxist sociological analyses of bureaucracy (such as Mills').

lost a \$1000 diamond ring presented him by admirers after the settlement of the big Pennsylvania coal strike. Capt. George Berke, a veteran life guard, found the ring, whereupon Mitchell peeled a hundred dollar bill from a roll he carried in his pocket and handed it to the captain as a reward for his find.³

In Britain, the phenomenon has tended to be less obscene, at least in terms of the wealth available to leading national officials. The existence of the Labour Party there has created a career path that is rewarding in a way that involves prestige and social incorporation more than wealth. The road to perdition is more likely to involve a detour through Westminster before retirement to the House of Lords.⁴

Australia's relatively tiny trade union movement has never been able to offer rewards on this scale, though the amalgamations of unions in the 1980s and 1990s have created larger and more powerful bureaucracies even as the percentage of the workforce in trade unions has declined. Accompanying this trend has been a tendency for officials to be recruited, not, as they traditionally were, from amongst the ranks of the members, but from outside. A substantial proportion of today's officials has been trained in law and/or industrial relations at university and has proceeded straight from graduation to employment as officials. But this was not, of course, the case in 1917 when many of the unions were too small to afford full-time officials. Even with the larger unions at this time, many officials at lower levels remained in the workforce and received only nominal payments for the extra time devoted to their duties.⁵ This does not necessarily make this strand of analysis completely irrelevant to Australia in 1917. The existence of a layer of officials with at least reasonable salaries is alluded to by two completely divergent contemporary sources. The first source is George Crossman, the federal secretary of the LEDFCA, who wrote a report in early 1918, which can be summed up as a lengthy 'I told you so' to his members in NSW for joining the strike against his advice. The report complained about:

³ Cited in: Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States*, New York: Longmans, 1980, pp.321-2.

⁴ A recent obituary illustrated this process. The obituary was for a Trotskyist activist, Ross Pritchard, who began his career as one of the leaders of a strike by apprentices at the Glasgow shipyards in 1961. It noted that Pritchard was one of the few members of the apprentice strike committee who failed to end up (via trade union officialdom and/or parliament) in the House of Lords. The other major exception was the comedian, Billy Connolly. See: The Guardian Online, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/obituaries/story/0,,423250,00.html>, accessed 6 September 2005.

⁵ UMA, Sugar Works Employees' Union of Australia (SWEUA) Papers, Melbourne Branch Minutes, 4 September 1917. At a time when this tiny union was stretched to its financial limits due to its members in CSR being on strike, its branch minutes record that the SWEUA paid 2 shillings and 6 pence to each of its delegates to attend Defence Committee meetings. Curiously, the secretary of the union was neither full-time nor a sugar worker. He was an engineer employed at the Newport railway yards.

One very unfortunate circumstance, [the fact that] the greater portion of the Strike Executive was composed of the paid officials of unions.⁶

He was making a populist point for the benefit of his more conservative members that officials who have no wages to lose could find it easy to remain on strike. It is a point that bears little resemblance to the reality of the 1917 strike, which was so clearly driven from below, more often than not, against the wishes of officials. However, it does indicate the existence of a substantial layer of salaried officials. The second source is to be found in the private notebooks of Ted Moyle, a leading activist in the IWW in Adelaide. As noted in Chapter One, Moyle applauded the fact that the strikes were started by ‘the workers themselves, in opposition to the union officials’, but regretted that ‘high salaried officials’ were in charge of the strike, and that the officials appeared to be ‘hanging back’ and ‘afraid to move’.⁷ These are however mere allusions, not conclusive proof that a significant layer of privileged officials existed.

A more significant point is the fact that the highest ranks of the full-time officials in 1917 in the larger unions (who were the most likely to be full-time paid officials) were, all other factors being equal, less responsive to the militant impulse of the rank and file than the lower ranks. This can clearly be seen in the case of large unions like the Seamen and the Waterside Workers. As was shown in Chapter Four, in both these cases the federal officials (who were more likely to be full-time and to be paid reasonable salaries) were more conservative than the state-level leadership. In the case of the Seamen’s Union, the initial agitation that began the strike in Sydney was led by the vice-president of the NSW branch, William Daly, who was also a working seaman.⁸ The federal officials opposed the initial walkout, then acquiesced rather than lead a strike they could not prevent – hence the lack of communication between the federal officials and the state branches complained about by the Victorians.⁹ Later (as we saw in Chapter Four) the Victorian Branch leaders, who had

⁶ UMA, Australian Federated Union of Railway & Locomotive Engineers papers, 10/1/1/2, *The Locomotive Journal of Australasia: The Official Organ of the Federal Railway Locomotive Engineers’ Association*, ‘Federal Executive’s Report’, January 1918, p.2.

⁷ See above, Chapter One, note 17.

⁸ *Daily Telegraph*, 14 August 1917, p.5. Daly is described (in a report of his trial) as a working seaman, also as ‘a native of Wales and a freethinker’.

⁹ The complaint can be found both in the *Age* reports of the time (see, for instance, *Age* 15 August 1917, p.9) and in a report cited in: Fitzpatrick and Cahill, *The Seamen’s Union of Australia*, p.44.

initially opposed the militants within their ranks when they wanted to take strike action, moved to the left with their membership and into bitter opposition to Cooper and the federal leadership. In the case of the wharfies, the federal secretary, Joe Morris, was inactive for the first three weeks of the strike. Meanwhile the NSW secretary of the union, Timothy McCristal, was being gaoled for sedition after making a speech in the Domain about the need to shoot ‘parasites’.¹⁰ After his 23 August run-in with Justice Higgins, Morris moved to end the strike but was thwarted at a Melbourne mass meeting where the Victorian state officials, Ernest Jones and J. Williams, after a heroic car trip from Sydney, regaled the audience with a portrait of the solidity of the strike in that city, helping thereby to secure a vote against Morris.¹¹

One apparent exception to this pattern was the behaviour during the strike of the leaders of the NSW railways union, the ARTSA. This was a union that, despite being confined to NSW, was one of the largest in the country. Its officials (at the highest level at least) were also, therefore, salaried and full-time. As was described in Chapter Three, these officials, led by the secretary, Claude Thompson, after some initial reluctance to spread the dispute beyond the workshops at Eveleigh and Randwick, called its members out throughout the state and worked hard (though without much success) to make the strike stick throughout the scattered ranks of its members in the rural areas. The leaders of the ARTSA also pushed the Defence Committee to call the Tramways Union out. Significantly, this was the one occasion where a union was called out by the peak committee rather than being held in.

This exception, however, makes perfect sense from a framework that sees the interests of union officials as being primarily concerned with the maintenance of the union machine. The railway workshops in NSW were the biggest workplaces in Australia. They were well organised and militant. To all the unions who had members there they were important, but to the ARTSA they were central. The rest of its members were scattered in tiny pockets throughout the state, often immersed in a conservative rural milieu. The card system was an attack directed at the heart of unionism on the railways. For this group of officials, at least, it had to be fought till the end – a completely different set of pressures from those that applied to unions

¹⁰ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 September 1917, p. 12: ‘All kings, governors, bosses, and parliamentarians are parasites fattening on the backs of the workers. These parasites on our back will not suffer in wages or wealth through the strike. Now, men, what would you do with a bug or a flea if you found one under your shirt? (A voice from the crowd called out “Kill it!”) Yes, that is the answer, and we have to destroy the parasites who are living on the backs of the workers.’

involved in solidarity action. It is explicable that this would prove to be the one case where the rank and file (at least outside of Sydney) was found to be significantly to the right of their officials, as around half of the non-metropolitan membership of the union 'scabbed'. This is an important point as it rests on an understanding that the officials had a different rather than a more privileged class position to their members. Their economic existence depended on the maintenance of the union machine and this would make them naturally more mindful of preserving that machine rather than risking it in overly aggressive industrial action. However, when the machine itself was threatened sufficiently to demand action, the officials might show more enthusiasm for action than the rank and file, for whom preservation of a union machine might appear less important than preservation of their pension funds.

Another strand to the Classical Marxist analysis of the trade union officials relates not to their material interests but to their relationship with the two main classes, the working class and the bourgeoisie. This is more a sociological than an economic analysis, relying as it does upon the routine of union bureaucracy – what Marx might have called their 'species-being'. Gramsci summed it up in lines written during his days as a journalist in Turin during the revolutionary upsurge of 1919-20:

The specialisation of professional activity as trade-union leaders, as well as the naturally restricted horizon which is bound up with disconnected economic struggles in a peaceful period, leads only too easily, amongst trade-union officials, to bureaucratism and a certain narrowness of outlook...From this also comes that openly admitted need for peace which shrinks from great risks and presumed dangers to the stability of the trade-unions...¹²

Rosa Luxemburg had made a similar point in 1906:

The rapid growth of the trade union movement in Germany in the course of the last fifteen years, especially in the period of great economic prosperity from 1895 to 1900, has naturally brought with it a great independence of the trade unions, a specialisation of their methods of struggle...and finally the introduction of a regular trade-union officialdom. All these phenomena are quite understandable...They are...an historically necessary evil. But...these necessary means of promoting trade union growth become, on the contrary, obstacles to further growth...¹³

¹¹ See above, Chapter Four, note 42.

¹² Original in *L'Ordine Nuovo*, reprinted in: Gramsci, *Soviets in Italy*, pp.9-11.

¹³ Luxemburg, *The Mass Strike*, pp.261-2.

The emphasis here is on the role of the trade union bureaucracy as a specialised group with possession of skills based on an arcane knowledge of legal procedure and an ability to negotiate. The officials are – the British Marxist, Tony Cliff was to argue more explicitly in the 1950s – brokers between the two main classes.¹⁴ In a general sense this means that the role of officials is to ameliorate and resolve class conflict as much as, or even more than, to initiate it. This role is manifested concretely in the everyday reality of trade unionism: a reality not so much of ceaseless struggle as of routine and mundane activities. The endless round of meetings and motions, the collection of dues, representations to individual employers regarding petty grievances, and appearances before industrial courts, all demand and reinforce a mindset which is likely to view industrial conflict as, at best, another problem to be resolved by the officials' arcane knowledge and skills. At worst, conflict, especially when it reaches the scale of something like the Great Strike, threatens to tear apart the whole delicate infrastructure of 'the industrial relations club'. The position of the officials is threatened from both directions: from an insurgent rank and file which begins to act as if it no longer needs the officials, and from the state and the employers who have been goaded into a frenzy of reaction which threatens the unions' very existence. In short, when conflict goes beyond the point where brokerage is possible, the brokers are out of business. Or as E.J. Kavanagh summed it up in his mournful reflection on the strike, unionism had reached its 'highest pinnacle' after 27 years of hard work, largely through arbitration, but it had been 'knocked down in 27 days by direct action in 1917'.¹⁵

This strand of analysis is especially relevant to Australia in 1917. While the economic differentiation between the rank and file and the officials was less developed than in larger countries, arbitration had added a bureaucratic twist to the development of trade unionism. The precocious movement that had been decimated in the strikes and the depression of the 1890s had been reconstructed in the first decade of the twentieth century. Arbitration began in NSW in the 1890s; it was extended to the federal sphere by the Harvester Decision in 1907.¹⁶ In the Harvester

¹⁴ Tony Cliff, 'Economic Roots of Reformism', *Socialist Review*, 1957, Reprinted in Tony Cliff, *Neither Washington Nor Moscow, Essays in Revolutionary Socialism*, London: Bookmarks, 1982.

¹⁵ Labor Council of NSW, *Report and Balance Sheet For the Half-Year Ending December 31st 1917*, p.9.

¹⁶ The Harvester Award was, in fact, nullified by a successful appeal to the High Court against the Excise Act on which it was based. Higgins, however, used it as a template for a range of further awards, which became in effect the basis of the Federal Arbitration system. See John Rickard, *H.B.*

Decision, proclaimed on 8 November 2007, Justice Higgins of the Commonwealth Court of Conciliation and Arbitration ruled that every unskilled, adult, male Australian worker should be paid a wage ‘appropriate to the normal needs of the average employee regarded as a human being living in a civilised community’.¹⁷ His judgement has correctly been identified as a major advance for working people, establishing as it did the principle that the living standard of unskilled workers should be based, not on what the market could bear, but on criteria of social justice.

Higgins, who had worked as an advocate for unions before being elevated to the court, possessed a genuine concern for the poor that has never been seriously questioned, but his concern for social justice was always allied with a concern for social peace. As one study of his career puts it: ‘Essentially a pragmatist, he believed social relationships should be ordered so as to minimise group conflict and exorcise poverty from Australia.’¹⁸ Arbitration reflected this duality. On the one hand, it gave the unions a recognised role in determining and safeguarding the wages and conditions of workers and provided what was, by the standards of the time, a generous safety net for the unskilled worker whose bargaining power is always limited. On the other hand, it aimed to minimise conflict both by softening the sharper edges of capitalism, and by directing the union movement away from industrial action and into the courts. It was both a reform and a method of incorporation.

The Harvester Decision was greeted with anger by the right and Higgins remained a reviled figure of conservative politics.¹⁹ This hostility has even resurfaced today, as the Howard Government has ridden the fashionable tide of neo-liberalism and has at last sought to undo the arbitration system established by the Harvester Case.²⁰ In the furore from the right, then and now, one aspect of the decision has

Higgins: The Rebel as Judge, Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1984, p.174. See also Mark Hearn, ‘Securing the Man: Narratives of Gender and Nation in the Verdicts of Henry Bournes Higgins’, *Australian Historical Studies*, vol. 37, no. 127, April 2006, pp.1-24.

¹⁷ P.G. Macarthy, ‘Justice Higgins and the Harvester Judgement’, in Jill Roe (ed.), *Social Policy in Australia: Some Perspectives 1901-1975*, Sydney: Cassell, 1976, pp.41-55.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, p.42.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, p.45 (citing reports in the *Worker*, 1918-21): ‘In 1917 and 1918 there were reports of pastoralists’ pressure on W. M. Hughes “to remove the president from the Federal Court”. In 1920 it was reported that “capitalists were moving heaven and earth to bring about the downfall of Mr. Justice Higgins...in 1917...[A]n open campaign of hostility was launched throughout Australia and numerous resolutions were sent from such capitalist organisations as the Employers’ Federation, Farmers and Settlers Associations, Chambers of Manufacturers, and Pastoral Associations demanding the Amendment of the Act and the removal of Judge Higgins.’

²⁰ See, for instance: <http://www.ipa.org.au/files/58-3%2013%20mistakes.pdf>, (accessed 16 October 2006) for a report by the neo-liberal think-tank, The Institute of Public Affairs, *Australia’s 13 Biggest Mistakes*, which lists the Harvester Judgement at number two.

tended to be ignored. Higgins actually found himself, during the hearings that preceded the decision, more in conflict with the unions than with the management of Sunshine Harvester. The basis for the decision was the Excise Tariff Act, which demanded that businesses receiving tariff protection prove that they paid decent wages. The union's interpretation of the act was that the workers should receive a share of the profits which would increase when the company was more profitable. Higgins rejected this, arguing that:

It would be ridiculous to make a manufacturer pay high wages when there are big profits, unless I allowed other manufacturers to pay low wages when there are small profits.²¹

Higgins thereby set a limit on the activity of unions. They were defenders against poverty and extreme exploitation. Their role was defensive rather than offensive; it was acceptable to defend their members against abuses, but it was not acceptable to challenge the right of employers to make windfall profits. A civilised but frugal existence was all that unskilled workers were entitled to, no matter how much wealth their labour created. In 1907, a labour movement recovering from the depths of recession and defeat had reason to applaud Higgins's assistance in that recovery. The time would come, however, when the movement had grown in power and confidence to such an extent that it could begin to assert more than a purely defensive, ameliorative role. The constraints that Higgins built into the Harvester Judgement would then become a barrier.

While official statistics for trade union membership began to be compiled only in 1912 (when the percentage of the workforce in unions had already reached 31 percent²²) there is little doubt that there was a significant revival in membership around the time of the Harvester Decision. A telling indicator is the date of foundation (or in some cases, re-foundation or reorganisation) of major unions. The national leadership of the Seamen's Union in 1917 had come to power in a major reorganisation in 1906.²³ The Waterside Worker's Federation was founded by amalgamating a variety of local unions in 1905. The wharfies famously chose a group of Labor parliamentarians (headed by William Morris Hughes) to head the new

²¹ Macarthy, 'Justice Higgins and the Harvester Judgement', p.51.

²² Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics, *Labour and Industrial Branch Report, no. 2, 1912*, p.90.

Federation. They were expelled in 1916, but one member of the 1905 team remained – the only wharfie on the original executive, Joe Morris.²⁴

The assumption that arbitration was responsible for the pre-war growth in union membership has, however, been challenged by recent scholarship. Sheldon and Markey have convincingly demonstrated that the pre-war growth in union membership had more to do with traditional forms of organising allied with favourable economic circumstances as the economy recovered from the depression of the 1890s.²⁵ In doing so they have challenged what they describe as the ‘Dependency Hypothesis’ of a previous generation of scholars who described the Australian trade union movement as being peculiarly dependent on arbitration.²⁶ More recently, in a case study of Metters’ Stovemakers in Sydney, Cockfield has shown how a militant group of workers was able to use arbitration whilst also conducting more traditional forms of militancy.²⁷

The unions may not have been built through arbitration, and they may not have been totally dependent upon it, but that does not mean that arbitration had no effect on them. What Sheldon and Markey’s revelations indicate is simply that arbitration can be better understood as a *response* to union growth than as a cause of it. It was a response which sought to tame and incorporate trade unions. It was not

²³ Fitzpatrick and Cahill, *The Seamen’s Union of Australia*, p.39.

²⁴ Peter Gahan, ‘Did Arbitration Make for Dependent Unionism? Evidence from Historical Case Studies’, *Journal of International Relations*, vol. 38(4), September 1996, pp.648-98, in an article devoted to deconstructing the myth that Australian unions were completely dependent on Arbitration – the ‘Dependency Hypothesis’, nevertheless provides evidence in two of his four case studies of the impetus provided to federal union organisation by arbitration. The Federated Clothing Trades Union emerged in 1907 as a federal union ‘with the express intention of gaining federal registration’ (p.661), although, due to internal union politics it did not achieve a federal award till 1919. The NSW branch resisted this move as it already had a generous award granted through the pre-existing NSW system. The Municipal Officers Federation was formed, albeit in 1920, from scratch ‘in direct response to federal arbitration’.

²⁵ P. Sheldon, ‘The Missing Nexus? Union Recovery, Growth and Behaviour During the First Decades of Arbitration: Towards a Re-evaluation’, *Australian Historical Studies*, no. 104, April 1995, pp.415-437; Ray Markey, ‘Explaining Union Mobilisation in the 1880s and the Early 1990s’, *Labour History*, No. 83, November 2002, pp.19-42. See also Rae Cooper, *Making the NSW Union Movement? A Study of Organising and Recruitment Activities of the NSW Labor Council 1900-1910*, Industrial Relations Research Centre, UNSW, 1996 and Rae Cooper & Greg Patmore, ‘Trade Union Organising and Labour History’, *Labour History*, No. 83, November 2002, pp.3-18, for further arguments against the ‘Dependency Hypothesis’.

²⁶ For a classic formulation of the ‘Dependency Hypothesis’ see W.A. Howard, ‘Trade Unions in the Context of Union Theory’, *Journal of Industrial Relations*, vol. 19, no. 3, September 1977, pp.255-73. On p.255, he argued that: ‘The Australian trade union can be regarded in general as an institution called into existence by a bureaucratic mechanism (the arbitration system) to enhance the functioning of that mechanism. Unions generally have not succeeded in carving out for themselves an industrial role that is independent of the arbitral system.’

²⁷ Sandra Cockfield, ‘Arbitration and the Workplace: A Case Study of Metters’ Stovemakers, 1902-22’, *Labour History*, no. 90, May 2006, pp.43-60.

totally successful, and it was always likely to have more influence on officials, who were given a central role in arbitration, than upon the rank and file, for whom grievances were more immediate and direct action a more obvious response. It is significant, for instance, that Cockfield's study reveals that the moulders at Metters achieved many of their industrial successes by defying union officials who preferred arbitration to direct action.²⁸ Moreover, while a causal association between arbitration and the pre-war growth in trade union membership has not been established, there is little doubt that the establishment of national union structures was accelerated by the Harvester Award. In order to achieve a federal award, it was necessary for unions to have a federal structure. Markey notes this development, whilst downplaying its significance:

National unions developed quite quickly, to total 72 in 1912, and 95 in 1919, accounting for over 80 percent of unionists, partly to take advantage of favourable decisions in the Commonwealth Court under the head of Justice Higgins, notably his 1907 Harvester Judgement...However, most of these organisations were really federations of State-based unions which conducted most union business and have remained the primary locus of union power ever since then.²⁹

We have seen, however, particularly in the case of the Waterside Workers Federation and the Seamen's Union, that the establishment of this new federal layer of bureaucracy did create a force for conservatism. It was a force that was not always successful in subduing the militancy of the state and local branches, but a force nonetheless.

If the Australian labour movement was totally dependent on arbitration, then an explosion of struggle such as occurred in 1917 would be unthinkable. Arbitration, however, was not the only option available to workers and their unions; in practice they were forced to resort to direct action as well. Arbitration had failed the Broken Hill miners in 1908 when their employers ignored the ruling of the Commission with impunity.³⁰ It was a *bête noir* of the IWW and the wider syndicalist current that emerged in the years before the war. However, the fact that the movement had rebuilt

²⁸ Ibid, pp.52-53.

²⁹ Markey, 'Explaining Union Mobilisation', p.24.

³⁰ Turner, *Industrial Labour and Politics*, p.42: 'The unions appealed to the Arbitration Court, seeking an award and an injunction restraining the Broken Hill Proprietary from closing its mines. Mr. Justice Higgins granted the injunction but warned the unions that it probably could not be enforced.'

itself largely without the help of arbitration does not mean that union officials did not believe it important – or even that it was the central strategy for union building. The only serious challenge to arbitration by any union before the war was the 1909 strike by the NSW coal miners under the leadership of the socialist, Peter Bowling, and this had been defeated.³¹ The idea of using arbitration remained, therefore, hegemonic within the official circles of the movement, and was especially important to the federal level officials of national unions who, for the most part, owed their existence to arbitration. Its influence can be seen, for example, in the refusal of the federal officials of the Amalgamated Engineers to allow their Victorian Branch to hold a strike ballot in late August 1917. According to the *Age*, a key motivation for this example of bureaucratic fiat was the belief that a national strike (or at least a strike in more than one state) would lead to a cancellation of the union's federal award.³² It can be seen even more starkly in Morris's abject response to being dressed down by Justice Higgins.³³ It is significant, that Higgins, as well as demanding that Morris engineer a return to work, required him to amend the union rules so that the individual branches were not allowed to strike without the consent of the federal executive. Morris complied and the branches – even while they remained on strike – passed the rules.³⁴

Higgins, the architect of the Harvester ruling, embodied all that was good, from the union point of view, about arbitration. He was an enlightened liberal who genuinely believed in intervention by the state in order to ensure a civilised and decent standard of living for the working classes. More importantly, by establishing the system of industrial awards, he had done so in a way that placed unions, and union officials, at the centre of the process. Higgins came to resemble during these turbulent years Trotsky's classic description of a liberal as possessing two symmetrical bumps on the left and right hand side of his head. The left bump was provided by the coal miners' strike of 1916, an outrage to Higgins' notions of orderly procedure, which had ended with (according to Higgins) a secret instruction from

³¹ Ibid, p.36. Bowling's personal hostility to arbitration was well known, but even his opposition, in this case, was only to the NSW system as modified by the conservative Wade government. This modification had been condemned by the labour movement, but the miners under Bowling were the only group to do anything about their opposition.

³² *Age*, 24 August 1917, p.5.

³³ See Chapter Four above, note 7.

³⁴ ANU, NBA, WWF papers, T62//1/1, COM minutes, 24 August – 11 October 1917, T62/28/4, telegram from Albany Branch WWF to COM (Undated), telegram from Morris to Melb., Bairnsdale & Port Phillip Branches of WWF, 24 September 1917.

Hughes to Higgins to end the strike on the miners' terms. Higgins refused and a more compliant judge was chosen.³⁵ Hughes was again involved in the provision of the right hand bump when, during the Great Strike, the Prime Minister pressured Higgins' to deregister the Waterside Workers' Federation. Higgins characteristically preferred to use the threat of deregistration to put pressure on Morris.³⁶ The times, however, had bypassed Higgins – the judicial master of the process of brokerage. It was no longer sufficient from the point of the view of the employers and the state to tame the unions; they had to be broken.

The final element in an understanding of the behaviour of the union officials in 1917 was their politics. Since the 1890s the Australian labour movement had been dominated by labourism, a peculiarly pragmatic and ideologically under-developed variant of social democracy.³⁷ From the 1880s onwards, some of the more sophisticated ideas of continental socialism had begun to infiltrate the antipodes. Peter Bowling, the failed opponent of arbitration, had been a member of the International Socialists, a small group of Marxists inspired by the Second International.³⁸ The young William Holman, by 1917 the conservative Premier of NSW (though he took no part in suppressing the strike as he was visiting Europe at the time), had made his name in 1893 as a socialist orator arguing for the superiority of Marx over Henry George.³⁹ The British socialist, Tom Mann, after helping to found the Victorian Socialist Party (VSP) had led the strike in Broken Hill in 1908.⁴⁰ The young secretary of the Timberworkers Union in Victoria, John Curtin, was also a

³⁵ NLA, W.M. Hughes Papers, MS1538, Series 18, 'Statement by Justice Higgins', 'My recollection of the facts is that on Sunday, the 26th November of last year, the registrar called on me at my house from the Prime Minister, with a request that I should act, and bearing written memoranda of the course to be taken, in the hand-writing of the Prime Minister.'; Rickard, *H.B. Higgins*, pp.232-2: 'The exact nature of the approach [from Hughes] later became a matter of controversy, when Higgins, in a passing remark in Court, scathingly implied that the judge Hughes eventually appointed for the task, Edmunds of New South Wales, acted under instructions from the prime minister, which he declined to do.' Hughes vehemently disputed this claim.

³⁶ Rickard, *H.B. Higgins*, p.236. Higgins was simultaneously in dispute with Hughes over the latter's refusal to allow him to arbitrate on the north Queensland rail strike. See the *Sun*, 2 September 1917, p.2, quotes Higgins, regarding the clash with Hughes over the WWF: 'I would like to convey to the Prime Minister that, rightly or wrongly, it is an embarrassment for me to know that he has power to subsequently do the same thing himself [de-register the WWF under the War Precautions Act]. I must certainly decline to be coerced by any power, whether it is by the Prime Minister or any other person, when I am exercising my judicial powers.'

³⁷ See Raymond Markey, *The Making of the Labor Party in New South Wales, 1880-1900*, Sydney: UNSW Press, 1988.

³⁸ Turner, *Industrial Labour & Politics*, p.36.

³⁹ H.V. Evatt, *Australian Labour Leader: the story of W.A. Holman and the labour movement*, Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1956, p.30.

member of the VSP. He had moved to Perth in early 1917.⁴¹ His old union, however, was one of the key constituents in the strike movement in Melbourne, and, perhaps significantly, held their mass meetings during the strike in the VSP's Socialist Hall in Exhibition Street.⁴² The defeats of the strikes of the 1890s and the bitter of that decade had, however, served to encourage a defensive mentality within the labour movement and to encourage a reliance on a form of parliamentary politics which marginalised revolutionary and even the more left-wing social democratic currents – notwithstanding these examples.⁴³

The leadership of the Miners' Union is in this regard, both more difficult to pin down and more revealing. It represented a recent amalgamation (only completed in 1915) of the most militant workers in the country, the coal miners and the metal miners of Broken Hill. Both groups of workers had suffered defeats in 1908. Both had begun to recover their organisation under new leadership in the years immediately preceding the war. Willis and Badderley were the architects of the amalgamation in an era where union amalgamation in and of itself carried the radical aura of the 'one big union' movement. Willis, in particular, a graduate of Ruskin College in Oxford, had a reputation for intellectual radicalism.⁴⁴ The successful miners' strike of 1916 was to cement their reputation. It was the 1916 strike that Vere Gordon Childe was referring to when he condemned the 1917 strike in comparison for 'lacking unitary control'.⁴⁵ For Childe it was the model of how a strike should be run – militant but centrally controlled by a strategically aware leadership.

Unfortunately, the reality of the victory of 1916 was more complex. According to Gollan, Willis and Baddeley were only goaded into calling the strike in the first place by a series of walkouts at lodge level. Later, as the strike approached its victorious denouement, Hughes attempted to get the miners to return without any concessions except that their demands (which included the eight-hour-day bank to bank) would be considered by an inquiry. He printed thousands of ballots asking for

⁴⁰ Verity Burgmann, *In Our Time: Socialism and the Rise of Labor, 1885-1905*, Sydney, Allen & Unwin, 1985, pp.40-41; Gollan, *The Coalminers of New South Wales*, p.127.

⁴¹ Lloyd Ross, *John Curtin: A biography*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1996.

⁴² See Burgmann, *In our time* and Geoffrey Charles Hewitt, *A History of the Victorian Socialist Party, 1906-1932*, Unpublished MA Thesis, Latrobe University, 1974.

⁴³ Markey, *The Making of the Labor Party in New South Wales*, describes this process particularly well.

⁴⁴ *Daily Telegraph*, 20 August 1917, p.5: 'Mr. Willis is a native of England where he was associated with unionism. It was stated in Labor circles yesterday that he had received an education at Ruskin College, an institution formed for the purpose of the tuition of working men in the history and economics of the Labor movement.'

the miners to vote on the question of return. The ballots included a written statement that the union executive supported a return to work. The statement was clearly correct, as the executive, under the leadership of Willis and Baddeley, agreed to distribute the ballots with the recommendation intact. As it turned out, the recommendation was not accepted. Furious aggregate meetings in the Northern and Southern Districts refused to co-operate with the ballot, and Hughes was forced to capitulate. The strike was won, and indeed it was a famous victory; but it was not a victory for 'unitary control'.⁴⁶

One way to look at the politics of trade union officials is to see how individual officials change over time – how the experience of being a trade union official affects the political ideas they hold. People do not normally become trade union officials because they want to be a bureaucrat or have an innate desire to restrain the insurgent spirit of the working class. Officials tend to be recruited from amongst the ranks of the more politically engaged and activist sections of the working class. Much of the time trade union officials will, therefore, be to the left of their members politically. In Australia, perhaps more than any other country, this phenomenon has a long history, as there has been a traditional willingness for workers to elect officials despite, or even because, those officials hold to 'ratbag' revolutionary ideas that the workers themselves reject. The historical strength of the Communist Party in the trade unions can partly be explained by this tradition.

There are countervailing tendencies to this 'vanguard' identity of the officials. The first is inherent to the nature of trade unions. Because unions, unlike revolutionary parties, need to embrace the whole of the class (or of the trade they represent within the class) to be effective, their leadership has to relate to the consciousness of the most conservative of their members as well as to the activists. Neither trade unions, nor their officials can ever be a 'vanguard' in the Leninist sense. The experience of John Curtin as Victorian secretary of the Timberworkers is instructive in this regard. Curtin was a young clerical worker who had become an activist and street orator in the VSP under the influence of Tom Mann. His best friend, Frank Hyett, also a VSP member, had obtained a position with the Victorian Railways Union and Curtin followed his example, applying for and winning an

⁴⁵ See Chapter One, page 6.

⁴⁶ Gollan, *The Coalminers of New South Wales*, p.146.

appointment to the Timberworkers' Union.⁴⁷ Curtin's main qualifications for the position were his oratorical and journalistic ability, honed in the VSP. He had never worked in the timber industry, but worked tirelessly, travelling to mills and logging camps, making speeches and attending to the tiresome work of handling the compensation cases that dogged this most dangerous of industries – a union-run compensation scheme was the union's most attractive feature to the workers in the industry.⁴⁸

Curtin's socialist principles remained strong, and the *Timberworker*, the journal he initiated and edited, carried many articles of propaganda including courageous anti-war articles from 1914 onwards.⁴⁹ It was Curtin who moved the motion at the anti-conscription conference in October 1916 for a stop work/strike meeting against conscription⁵⁰; yet, in six years as secretary of the union, this was the only strike he led.⁵¹ It is tempting to draw a connection between Curtin's tireless socialistic propaganda in the union journal and the fact that in 1917, after he had resigned his position and moved to Western Australia, the timber workers in Melbourne played a prominent part in the strike movement. It is significant that, in the columns of the *Westralian Worker*, which he now edited, Curtin wrote approvingly of the strike, even after it was defeated.⁵² Yet it is also significant that his friend, Frank Hyett, still a member of the VSP, as secretary of the Victorian Railways Union (VRU), made sure his union did not join the strike, ignoring those militants in his union, such as the shunters at Spencer Street Station, who wanted to

⁴⁷ David Day, *John Curtin: a life*, Sydney: HarperCollins, 1999, p.134. Hyett was initially appointed as organiser in 1910, but quickly rose to be secretary of the union.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, pp.142-3: 'Much of the attraction of the union for its members came from the disability and death insurance that it offered in an accident prone industry...he [Curtin] would be bemoaning the administrative burden of the accident and death fund until his departure from the union in 1915.'

⁴⁹ See, for instance, the *Timberworker*, 17 September 1914.

⁵⁰ See Chapter Two, note 67.

⁵¹ In fact, he had already resigned his position by the time of the conference and was technically no longer an official. Day, *John Curtin*, p.168, citing a report written by Curtin in late 1913, suggests that Curtin was not happy with the fact that he had no opportunity to lead strikes: 'The only problem was that the union had been marked by a decided lack of any action. Due perhaps to the negotiation skills of Curtin, the year had seen no stoppages of timber workers, with all disputes being settled peacefully while other industries were marked by considerable strife.' The fact remains, however, that apart from the many editorials he penned for the *Timberworker* about socialism and revolution, the routine led by Curtin was indistinguishable from that of moderate union leaders.

⁵² *Westralian Worker*, November 1917, cited in Ross, *John Curtin: A Biography*, p.60: 'The truth is that the only thing the plutocracy really fear is the well-organised army of Labor. Political campaigns come and go.'

show solidarity with their comrades in NSW.⁵³ Hyett's transition from a socialist who envisaged using the union movement to promote socialism to an official determined to keep the Victorian Railways out of the Great Strike, is a powerful demonstration of the way in which (to return to the phrase of Gramsci, cited above) the 'specialisation of professional activity...leads only too easily, amongst trade-union officials, to bureaucratism and a certain narrowness of outlook'. Hyett was a great success as secretary of the VRU. He built it up, through amalgamations and recruitment from 2,000 to 12,000 members.⁵⁴ The means by which he achieved these ends – primarily negotiating the peaceful absorption of smaller unions – was not a course that was likely to encourage a militant mentality. By 1915, in a debate within the VSP about which model of One Big Union to support, Hyett fought against W.P. Earsman, an engineer and member of the ASE and future leader of the Communist Party. Earsman wanted the union to be modelled on syndicalist principles whereas Hyett preferred a top-down bureaucratic approach modelled on his experience with the VRU.⁵⁵ Hyett had spent years patiently building the VRU into a powerful machine. He had begun by seeing the union as a weapon in the fight for socialism. By 1917, the magnificence of that weapon had become too precious a thing to be endangered by use.

The second, and probably the most important, countervailing tendency to the 'vanguard' identity of left-wing officials, has to do with the way that the political consciousness of the working class develops and changes over time, and the way, in particular, in which the different life experience of officials can separate them from the pressures that radicalise their members. The radicalisation of the working class has never proceeded on the basis of orderly and patient propaganda by an enlightened few. In periods such as the First World War (and later the Great Depression), economic and political crises inspire outbursts of mass political activity, strikes and protests. These lead, in turn, to a shift to the left in which propaganda and agitation plays a role. However it is the experience of the crisis by individual workers that

⁵³ *Age*, 23 August 1917, p.8, reported that: 'There is a turbulent section of the railway service which is badly disappointed over the result of the recent strike ballot and which is now advocating sympathetic action in respect of the New South Wales railway men. These men are in the minority, and not the least militant among them are to be found among the shunters.'; *Age*, 24 August 1917, p.5, reported that the shunters at Spencer Street station voted to ban goods from NSW; *Age*, 25 August 1917, p.11, then reported that the response of the officials to this decision was not to act on it: 'It is significant that although the Council [of the Victorian Railways Union] met on [the following] Thursday night it did not decide one way or the other.'

⁵⁴ Day, *John Curtin*, p.135.

⁵⁵ Hewitt, *A History of the Victorian Socialist Party*, p.191.

creates the audience for the previously isolated activist minority. The economic crisis and the threat of conscription had combined in such a way in 1917, as was noted in Chapter Two.

How does the distinction between officials and rank and file workers relate to all of this? The differences in their life experience – their different class locations – mean that they experience the crisis differently. For example, the strike wave during the First World War was largely fuelled by an explosion in the cost of living. For the mass of workers the equation was simple: they could no longer make ends meet and arbitration was too slow a mechanism to resolve the problem, so they increasingly resorted to strike action. The success of the Broken Hill miners in 1915/16, followed by the coal miners in late 1916, provided an example and inspiration. In this atmosphere, the tiny bands of syndicalists and socialists who had been arguing against arbitration and in favour of direct action for years, suddenly found a mass audience. The IWW, in particular, grew in influence.

For the officials, especially those who were no longer in the workforce, the crisis impacted upon them more indirectly. They experienced it more in terms of the increasing restiveness of their members, and their greater eagerness to take action. In many cases this resulted in officials being overtaken by events, by a rank and file, once passive, apathetic and inarticulate, suddenly bursting into militancy and shifting dramatically to the left, often outflanking the officials in the process. The officials may once have been workers who became officials because they were the most active and committed at that point of time. But that point of time had passed, and they became, as it were, a layer captured in amber reflecting the politics that prevailed in their youth, modified only by years spent in the far-from-radicalising milieu of officialdom. The Melbourne Branch of the Seamen's Union is a classic example of this. One of the weakest branches of the union became, during the strike, its most militant. The confusion and exasperation are evident in the complaint of the unidentified Sydney official of the Seamen's Union who, as mentioned in Chapter Four, complained to the *Sydney Morning Herald*, regarding the Melbourne Branch's newfound militancy. It was a militancy that he could only explain as the product of external force, whether that was the arrival of militants from Sydney or a mysterious and sinister agency providing them with meals and boots.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ See Chapter Four, note 185.

The press reports of the mass meetings in 1917 consistently stress a difference in the behaviour of younger workers. They are described as being more militant. While some of this may be dismissed as a cliché about radicalism and youth, it makes sense that younger workers would be more militant. They would be less constrained by family responsibilities or mortgages (the latter less common than today but mentioned in some contemporary reports as a concern, especially for skilled workers). They would less likely be worried about pension funds, which were often controlled by the employer and subject to penalties for strike action.⁵⁷ Many of the skilled railworkers, especially the engine drivers who continued at work, are reported to have been motivated by concern for their pensions. Over and above these economic motives there is the fact that younger workers would only have experienced a labour movement on the offensive. Older workers would remember times when the going was tougher. If they were old enough, they would have experienced the defeats of the 1890s and the depression that followed. In contrast to this, the youngest layers of the working class would only have experienced a movement that was growing in strength; they were schooled in victory rather than defeat, and a super confidence bordering on hubris is a consistent feature of the very young in any period of insurgence.

In this context, it becomes relevant that the lower ranks of the officials would normally tend to be younger than the higher ranks. William Daly of the seamen was in his early 30s and Timothy McCristal of the wharfies was 35, which made them both, while not exactly young, a generation younger than the federal officials of their respective unions. McCristal, moreover, cannot have been an official for very long in 1917 since he was a returned serviceman. The Domain speech for which he was imprisoned referred to his experience at the front (before proceeding to the need to eliminate parasites by shooting them).⁵⁸ His experience of being an official was, therefore, confined to the period immediately preceding the Great Strike when the movement was experiencing an unprecedented wave of militancy. The fact that he had just returned from the carnage in France is unlikely to have encouraged a

⁵⁷ CSR in Victoria provides an example of this: ANU, NBA, CSR papers, 142/204, Letter from Frank Tudor MP to W.M. Hughes, 19 September 1917: 'Every employee concerned with the strike has to either withdraw his money paid into the Provident Fund *without interest* and be re-employed or else retire and take a reduced pension.' (Emphasis in original.)

⁵⁸ *Daily Telegraph*, 16 August 1917, p.6; *Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 August 1917, p.8.

conservative outlook.⁵⁹ In any case, this contrasts to the experience of Joe Morris in Melbourne, who had spent the previous decade patiently building the Federation in partnership with Hughes, primarily through the use of arbitration.

The identification of a trade union bureaucracy, and of a conservative tendency therein, is not, therefore, made untenable by the subtleties and distinctions often presented in response to ‘rank and filist’ analyses: the left wing politics of some officials, the existence of intermediary layers, of a ‘grey area’ between the higher pinnacles of the bureaucracy and the rank and file, or the fact that workers are not always champing at the bit to confront their bosses. A bureaucracy is not necessarily an edifice with a locked gate within which no one ever dreams, misbehaves or breaks the rules. Nor need it be reduced and defined to an identifiable group of ‘bureaucrats’, labelled with the distinction and certainty normally associated with comparative zoology. Individual officials will be influenced by factors other than their interests *as officials*. They may enter into their positions with radical, or even revolutionary politics. They may have partners or children who are still working, perhaps who are rank and file members of their union. In the period of this study, they may well themselves have remained within the workforce. Most importantly, their behaviour in office will always be modified and constrained by the attitudes and activities of their members.⁶⁰ How much they are so modified and constrained will of course be in turn determined by the extent to which the union itself is democratic and to which the members are active and organised. All these countervailing factors, however, have individual relevance. They will vary from official to official and from union to union, whereas the factors that tend to generate bureaucracy and conservatism are universal. The greater the number one looks at, therefore, the more the general tendencies of type prevail over individual idiosyncrasy.

⁵⁹ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 September 1917, p. 12. Earlier in his notorious speech, McCristal referred to his service in France in terms that make it clear that he had been radicalised by the experience.

⁶⁰ For a discussion of this point see: Bramble, ‘Trade Union Organisation and Workplace Industrial Relations in the Vehicle Industry 1963-1991’.

Chapter Six: Was Defeat Inevitable?

It is generally accepted that the Great Strike was beaten by two things – coal stocks and scabbing. With regard to the first, Vere Gordon Childe wrote in 1925 that there was simply too much coal at grass.¹ Ian Turner observed, regarding the miners' leaders, Willis and Baddeley, that they 'were against a strike at this time, because the tactical position of the miners – determined always by the stocks of coal at grass, was not good'.² When the decision was made by the executive of the Miners' Union to end the strike on the coal fields there was a short-lived rebellion by a number of lodges on the Maitland field – the field which contained Richmond Main and Pelaw Main, the two mines worst hit by scabbing and, consequently, by victimisation. The President of the Pelaw Main Lodge, in moving a motion denouncing the union executive, drew attention to their failure to prevent the consolidation of coal reserves after the successful strike of 1916.³ There is little doubt that the level of coal stocks available to the Government was a crucial strategic question. The Government may have been able to ride out an effective strike in many industrial sectors but, as had been proven in November 1916, they could not do so on the coalfields. This was still the era of steam. Industry and transport were still overwhelmingly powered by coal, and, if the supply of coal could be stopped, the Government would have no choice but to capitulate.

During the strike, the press made much of the large reserves allegedly held by the NSW Railways and of the coal held at grass at the various collieries. Some of the claims are vague and were obviously meant for propaganda purposes. However, useful figures were provided in late August by the *Newcastle Herald* – a paper that was relatively neutral in its attitude to the strike, and which is, therefore, comparatively free of the more blatant pro-government 'spin'. According to the *Herald*:

The requirements of the State for railways, tramways, ferries, power and lighting are about 3500 tons daily. The actual reserves at present are, on a conservative estimate 250,000 tons, four-fifths of which is in the possession of the Railway Department. The daily consumption under the severe restrictions in force is under 3000 tons. In addition to reserves actually held it is estimated

¹ Childe, *How Labour Governs*, p.22.

² Turner, *Industrial Labour and Politics*, p.148.

³ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 October 1917, p. 8.

that there are about 180,000 tons of coal at grass, and it is fairly certain that this will soon be transported, added to the reserves, and used for the various requirements of the Commonwealth. The reason for the severe restrictions lies in the fact that it would be a foolish policy to take the slightest risk of exhausting the reserves before the Government has demonstrated that it can win sufficient supplies of coal by voluntary labour, and also because the other States depend largely on upon the New South Wales coal mines and will come to the end of their reserves much more quickly. The coal requirements of the Commonwealth are about 70,000 tons a week. Within a short period the Government expects to get by voluntary labour 30,000 to 35,000 tons of coal weekly. A little later it hopes that the production will equal the restricted requirements of the Commonwealth.⁴

If we accept these figures (and they are consistent with the figures for coal production provided by the annual report of the Railways Commissioners⁵), then it would seem that NSW was not in danger of running out of coal. With 430,000 tons available at grass and in reserve, the State Government had 143 days' supply of coal, plus whatever could be worked by scabs in that time. The situation is not so clear-cut, however, if we consider more than simply the requirements of the NSW Government. The *Newcastle Herald* appears to be referring only to the State Government's requirements ('railways, tramways, ferries, power and lighting') plus the coal exported interstate when it talks of a total 'Commonwealth' requirement of 70,000 tons a week. This is confirmed by figures provided for the consumption of coal by NSW in 1921, in a Militant Minority pamphlet produced in 1928. This states that, in 1921, 2,771,949 tons of coal was exported from NSW – a figure that matches closely to the 2,160,906 exported from the Port of Newcastle in 1917.⁶ It then goes on, however, to say that the NSW requirements (that is, the total requirements of the state, including domestic consumption and private industry as well as government) were 5,268,628 tons a year – 101,320 tons per week. Only, then, by starving private

⁴ *Newcastle Herald & Miners' Advocate*, 27 August 1917, p.5. *Sun*, 13 August 1917, p.7 provides some idea of what the 'severe restrictions in force' entailed. From 14 August, domestic use of gas – for lighting, cooking or heating – was banned between 8 a.m. and 5 p.m.

⁵ The figures in the Commissioners' report are detailed below in Table 2. They show that the Port of Newcastle alone transported 2,160,906 tons of coal interstate in 1916-17 – a weekly average of 41,556 tons. The *Newcastle Herald's* figure of 3,500 tons per day for the coal consumed *within* would give a weekly total for NSW of 24,500 tons which, if added to the export total, gives 66,056 tons. To this must be added any coal exported directly from the pier at Wallarah, from Wollongong/Port Kembla or (by train) from Lithgow. This would total a figure very close to that of 70,000 tons provided by the *Herald*.

⁶ See note 5, above for the figure of 2,160,906 (note that the Port of Newcastle was not the only port that would have exported coal). ANU, NBA, ACSEF Papers, E165/10/8, *The Coal Crisis: The Miners' Next Step*, Sydney: Militant Minority, 1928, p.6.

industry and domestic consumers of coal, could the reserves of the NSW Government be maintained.

The only way out of that dilemma was to produce coal with scabs. The Acting Premier boasted in mid-September that:

...since August 27th the Bureau has placed the following men: – Collieries; Wallarah, 376; Muswellbrook, 49; Invincible, 162; Gunnedah, 8; Oakey Park 113; Morton Main, 25; Lithgow Valley, 102; Total, 832. Boats; Tuggerah, 9. Ilaroo, 10; Beulah, 11; Wallarah, 12; Alice and Pelaw Main, 17; Weir and Bellinger, 17; Hunter, 8; Kooyong, 7; Southborough, 17; Helen Nicol, 2; Duckenfield, 5; Australstream, 1; Macleay River Company, 5, Total, 134; Coke Shovellers; North Bulli Colliery, 25; Bellambi, 73; Carlos Gap Colliery, 12; Sydney Harbour Battalion, 54; Total, 164. Referred to Transport Officer, 200; referred to Labour and Industry for gas work and wharf work, 23; for transport work at Newcastle, 47; to Master Carrier's Association, 24. Grand total, 1424. In addition to the men sent direct from the bureau at least 200 have gone direct from their own home to various collieries...Already, as I have pointed out, we are producing [from the NSW collieries combined] 3000 tons of coal a day. From one colliery alone, at Maitland, we will get an additional 1500 tons a day within the next week.⁷

Fullers' claims need heavy qualification. The colliery that was expected to provide '1500 tons a day', for instance, was almost certainly either Richmond Main or Pelaw Main (the only collieries in the district big enough to make such a figure possible). These two collieries were producing coal exclusively for the Victorian Government and not very much at that. The extent of the scabbing effort is revealed by the figures in the following table, provided in a report in January 1918 prepared by the Undersecretary to the Minister for Labour and Industry:⁸

Table 1

Colliery	Number of 'volunteers'	Tons 'put out' during strike
Pelaw Main	176	1,626
Richmond Main	240	5,781
Abermain No. 2	264	7,000

⁷ *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners' Advocate*, 17 September 1917, p.4. It is significant that, comparing these figures with those in Table 1 below, Fuller appears to have overstated the number of scabs at Invincible by (three) Oakey Park (by eight), and Morton Main (by ten). As the figures in Table 1 are from a confidential government report compiled after the strike, and those quoted by Fuller are from a press release produced in the heat of a propaganda war, the Table 1 figures are to be preferred.

⁸ NSA, 19/1527.1, Minute addressed to Undersecretary Department of Mines from Undersecretary, Department of Labour and Industry, 25 January 1918, 'Number of loyalist workers and the quantity of coal put out during the late coal strike.'

Aberdare East	200	1,200
Burwood	47	2,383
Muswellbrook	98	2,906
Northumberland	14	2,303
Northumberland Ext.	22	2,947
Awaba	3	226
Wallerah	430	32,780
Gunedah	45	1,855
Oakey Park	105	2,158
Lithgow Valley	126	4,961
Invincible	159	7,729
Morton Main	15	900
Carlos Gap	17	177
North Bulli	62	150
Total	2,023	77,082

Fuller was deliberately ambiguous in his language when he claimed that the scabs were ‘producing 3000 tons of coal’, refusing to distinguish between the winning of coal and the provision of coal in total by scab efforts; the term ‘put out’ used in the Labour and Industry report involves the same conflation, which also, therefore, applies to the figures in Table 1. This means that much of the 3,000 tons Fuller boasted of, and of the total 77,082 produced by the scabbing effort during the course of the strike, was not coal won from the mines but coal at grass, loaded by the scabs into trucks. Reports from individual mines where scabbing took place indicate that this was the initial focus of activity – which makes sense given the lack of skills available.⁹ Why employ unskilled men in the difficult and dangerous task of winning coal underground when there were plentiful reserves that merely needed to be shovelled into wagons? On the one hand, 3,000 tons of coal a day, from whatever source, was sufficient to provide the needs of the NSW government (though not of private consumers). On the other hand, if it was largely obtained from the reserves at grass, then clearly the reserves were being run down. The *Sun* of 12 September 1917 stated that: ‘Reserves in hand would suffice the Railway and Tramway Departments for over two months. In addition there are at least 150,000 tons of coal at grass’.¹⁰ This is 30,000 less than the figure for coal at grass provided by the *Newcastle Herald* two weeks earlier. It is also nearly half the total tonnage produced by scabs – a

⁹ See, for instance, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 28 August 1917, p.6: ‘There is a large quantity of coal on the surface [at Wallarah], and this will no doubt be shipped quickly.’

¹⁰ *Sydney Sun*, 12 September 1917, p.5.

plausible proportion. It would seem then that the reserves of coal at grass were being run down by about 15,000 tons a week – a significant amount, but not a rate sufficient to win the strike within weeks rather than months.

We now can return to the question of whether the strike was doomed from the start. The reserves of coal were, as we have seen, far less substantial than they appeared. The economic cost of allowing large sectors of industry to shut down had to be borne in order to maintain the mountain of coal that Fuller boasted of in the press. Moreover, this strike was a showdown between the labour movement and the NSW and Commonwealth governments; it was not simply a fight with the NSW Railways. The evidence is that, however plentiful the coal stocks may have been in NSW, in other states the situation was far less rosy. Indeed, if the coal reserves of the NSW Railways were, as Fuller claimed, increased by the modest efforts of the scabs¹¹, this can only have been achieved by starving the other states of coal. Table 2 shows where coal exported from the port of Newcastle was sent in the year 1916/17 and what that meant in terms of daily requirements:¹²

Table 2

Destination	Total Tonnage	Average Daily Usage
Victoria	1,038,206	2,844
South Australia	760,879	2,084
Queensland	121,785	333
Western Australia	153,172	419
Tasmania	86,864	238
New Zealand	369,310	1,012
Fiji	56,524	155
Peru	15,178	42
New Caledonia	27,728	76
India	72,303	198
United Kingdom	12,637	35
Hong Kong	7,929	22
Mauritius	1,909	5
Chile	86,103	236
Sandwich Islands	22,470	62
Java	31,738	87
South Sea Islands	52,692	144
Singapore	61,411	168
Other	101,788	278

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² NSA, 12/12633.5, New South Wales Government Railway and Tramways, *Report of the Commissioners for the Year Ending 30 June 1917*, p.55.

In other words, to meet the normal daily requirements of the other states, at least a further 5,918 tons produced per day would have been necessary. Over the six weeks of the strike, this would amount to around 250,000 tons. The export trade might be abandoned - though the New Zealanders would not have been happy - and Prime Minister Hughes intervened to ensure that coke continued to be supplied to New Caledonia's nickel smelters (they were deemed essential to the war effort).¹³ The export of coal to the states was, however, more politically sensitive.

If there were no significant reserves interstate, then either the NSW reserves would have to be sent interstate, or Victoria and South Australia would be starved of coal. If the build-up of coal reserves prior to the strike is evidence of a political conspiracy, then it would seem that the other state governments were not in on it. The South Australian Gas Company is a good example. Both the South Australian gas and electricity companies had a limited supply at the beginning of the strike and could only have been kept going by coal sent from NSW.¹⁴ On 14 September, the South Australian Premier, Peake, sent an urgent telegram to Fuller in NSW:

Board directors S.A. Gas Co. have pointed out to Government their inability to obtain coal under existing contract with J. & A. Brown as result of strike and represent that with present depleted stocks of coal it will be impossible to maintain gas supply for more than three or four weeks from today's date.¹⁵

There followed a three way correspondence between Peake, Fuller and Hughes (the Commonwealth had taken charge of all shipping) to arrange a shipment of coal in return for South Australian salt shipped as back cargo. The final telegram in the series, dated 5 October 1917, recorded that the 'S.S. *Age*' would start loading the coal on 'Monday'. Three weeks after stating they only had 'three or four' weeks' supply left, the coal needed to maintain South Australia's gas supply was still waiting in Sydney to be loaded; Adelaide must have gone very close to running out of coal.¹⁶ Queensland, despite possessing its own supplies of coal, clearly relied to some extent on NSW coal as well, as the figures in Table 2 show. Ironically, the pressure on the

¹³ NSA, 9/4747 Premier's Department, Inwards Correspondence, Letter from Hughes to Fuller, 22 August 1917.

¹⁴ *The Daily Telegraph*, 23 August 1917, p.6: 'The District Naval Officer (Commander Burford) has taken control of all coal. The stock ashore at Port Adelaide and Adelaide is about 3800 tons and there is [sic] 8000 tons in hulks at Port Adelaide.'

¹⁵ NSA, 9/4749, Premier's Department Inwards Correspondence, Telegrams between Hughes Fuller & Peake, 12 September 1917 – 5 October 1917.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

Queensland Railways' coal stocks was relieved by an unrelated railway strike in north Queensland that limited its coal consumption. Nevertheless, the Labor Premier of Queensland, T. J. Ryan, complained to Fuller in late September about the shortage of coal that was threatening the meat works in Townsville.¹⁷ Ryan eventually devised a scheme to reconcile his Labor principles with the need to keep his state supplied with coal by chartering a number of 'White Ships', crewed by unionists, to fetch food and coal from Sydney to north Queensland (they also delivered Queensland exports to Sydney).¹⁸

Western Australia had its own supplies of coal, from the Collie mine. It could use this coal for almost all normal purposes with one exception. Maitland coal was preferred normally for the WA Railways. Collie coal could be, and was, substituted. However, it was not suitable for use in the wheat areas of the state during the summer months as it tended to spark and produce bush fires.¹⁹ The strike finished in the middle of spring, and would therefore have needed to last a few more weeks to have an impact on Western Australia.

There was one place outside of NSW that, more than any other, demanded the attention of Billy Hughes in particular during the strike. That place was Port Pirie, where the lead from Broken Hill was smelted before being sent to Britain to feed the insatiable demands of the munitions industry. The Port Pirie smelter actually supplied the majority of the lead used on the Western Front; its importance to the war effort could not have been greater.²⁰ In the sketchy records Hughes kept of the cabinet meetings that took place during the strike, the only mention of industrial matters was a discussion of Port Pirie on 21 August.²¹ The reason for his concern is explained by

¹⁷ NSA, 9/4748, Premier's Department, Inwards Correspondence, Telegram from Ryan to Hughes, 17 September 1917.

¹⁸ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 October 1917, p.6.

¹⁹ *West Australian*, 16 August 1917, p.5.

²⁰ The importance of the lead from Port Pirie is asserted in a number of places. See for instance, *Daily Telegraph*, 25 August 1917, p.10: 'To serve the Imperial needs the Broken Hill Proprietary Limited has spent huge sums in perfecting their plant to turn out an increasing quantity of lead that is so much needed by the Allies, the greater part of which comes from this source. About 2500 men are employed at the works here.'; *Daily Telegraph*, 27 August 1917, p.5, states that the smelters were producing 150,000 tons of lead annually 'for Britain and her allies'; *Barrier Miner*, 13 August 1917, p.4, cites Mr. W. Robertson, the manager of the Port Pirie smelter: 'By the last English mail particulars were received of an order made by the British Government, under the Munitions of War Act, requiring everyone in possession of half a ton of lead to place it immediately at the disposal of the Government. Owners of private yachts stripped off any lead from the keels or in the ballast and delivered same to the Government.'

²¹ NLA, W.M. Hughes Papers, MS1538, Series 16: There are no official records of Cabinet meetings prior to 1922. Hughes' notes mainly consist of a scribbled list of attendees and subject headings. The

the transcript of a delegation of mine owners from Broken Hill, headed by William Baillieu, which met Hughes on 6 August. The transcript, alluded to in another context in Chapter Two, bears repeating:

Hughes: How are you getting on at Port Pirie? What is the extent, if at all, that you would be incommoded by a refusal of wharf laborers to handle any class of cargo?

Baillieu: We could go on with smelting I should say with the coal for not more than four weeks.

Hughes: It would not last that long.²²

The smelters and waterfront at Port Pirie were part of an industrial unit with the mines at Broken Hill. When work was slack in the mines, miners would drift down to the Port and try to get work in the smelter or on the wharves. They brought with them the militant traditions of the Barrier. In the smelter, dominated as it was by a core of skilled craft unionists, this militancy clashed with a more conservative form of unionism.²³ There was no such clash on the waterfront, and Port Pirie was one of the most militant branches of the Waterside Workers' Federation. It had won a series of extra payments for 'special cargoes' under the leadership of Arthur Turley (who would eventually succeed Morris as secretary of the Federation, a role he would fill from 1928 to 1937).²⁴

The workers in the smelter refused to strike. There was clearly some enthusiasm for a strike. Flynn and Middling, the two delegates sent from Broken Hill to agitate for a strike at Port Pirie, addressed a meeting of the Port Pirie Trades Hall on the night of 22 August.²⁵ The following morning they addressed an impromptu street meeting of four hundred, which unanimously voted in favour of a strike.²⁶ Later there were at least two mass meetings at the smelter (who organised them is not recorded) which voted to strike – one on 24 August and another on 27 August.²⁷

entry in Hughes' notes for the meeting of 21 August regarding Port Pirie is therefore cryptic but, nonetheless, slightly ominous: 'Port Pirie: IWW men and Broken Hill delegates – action to be taken.'

²² NLA, W.M. Hughes Papers, MS1538, Series 18. 'Smelting at Broken Hill: Deputation to Prime Minister, 6 August 1917.'

²³ *Barrier Miner*, 24 August 1917, p.3, states that at the time of the strike there were 2,411 employees at the smelter (excluding salaried staff).

²⁴ Graeme T. Powell, 'Uncertain Frontiers': a study of the Waterside Workers' Federation in South Australia 1917-1922, Unpublished Thesis (BA Hons.) University of Adelaide 1966, pp. 34-36 and pp. 87-91.

²⁵ *Barrier Miner*, 23 August 1917, p.1.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Barrier Miner*, 27 August 1917, p.1.

These votes were not accepted by the leadership of the five main unions at the smelter who organised their own ballots, which recorded a vote of four to one against striking.²⁸ On 28 August Flynn was arrested under *the War Precautions Act* along with a number of local ‘troublemakers’.²⁹ On 17 September, the representatives of the various unions at the smelter made their wartime collaboration official by attending a conference at BHP’s headquarters in Melbourne where they signed a pledge not to take any strike action for the duration of the war.³⁰

The Port Pirie wharfies were, however, another question. On 25 August, Hughes had telegraphed Fuller that there was only eleven days’ supply of coal left at the smelter.³¹ When a cargo of 3,300 tons arrived from Newcastle on 30 August, the Port Pirie wharfies refused to touch it. The reaction from Hughes was immediate. The whole of the Port Pirie district was declared a military zone and preparations were made to unload the coal at Port Augusta and then send it to Port Pirie by rail.³² Turley and the other branch officials had opposed the decision of their members not to unload the coal.³³ Now, they faced the threat of gaol. Their spines would hardly have been stiffened by the reaction of Joe Morris and the Federal Committee of Management of their union that declared:

That it is imperative that the members of the Port Pirie Branch handle all cargoes necessary for the production of munitions to carry on the war against the enemies of England and any member failing to carry out the above instruction shall be expelled.³⁴

Not surprisingly, the members of the WWF at Port Pirie eventually capitulated, and returned to work on 5 September – exactly eleven days after Hughes had telegraphed

²⁸ *Sun*, 25 August 1917, p.5.

²⁹ *Barrier Miner*, 28 August 1917, p.1.

³⁰ NSA, 9/4761, Premier’s Department, Inwards Correspondence, ‘CONFIDENTIAL’ Copy of statement signed by representatives of the ASE, AWU., WWF (Fed. COM), FIA, FEDFA., and BLF (Builders’ Labourers’ Federation) at Collins House Melbourne, 17 September 1917.

³¹ NSA, 9/4761, Premier’s Department, Inwards Correspondence, Telegram, Hughes to Fuller, 25 August 1917.

³² Margo Beasley, *Wharfies: A history of the Waterside Workers’ Federation of Australia*, Sydney: 1996, pp. 92-3. UMA, Broken Hill Associated Smelters (BHAS) Papers, Box 293, contains a variety of correspondence between the Company Management in Melbourne and the Smelter’s manager regarding the provision of coal during the strike. The coal sent by rail was sent in drabs and drabs (tonnages ranging from eighty to three hundred and ninety) from Port Augusta where it was unloaded (very slowly over August and September). This kept the smelter running until more substantial supplies could be unloaded at the more suitable facilities at Port Pirie.

³³ ANU, NBA, WWF papers, E171/56, Telegram, Turley to Morris, 1 September 1917.

³⁴ NBA, T62/1/1, WWF COM Minutes, 8 September 1917.

Fuller to warn him that the smelter had only eleven days' supplies.³⁵ The situation was to remain critical at the smelter for the remainder of the strike since, even with the wharfies back at work, the seamen's strike meant that it took the full resources of the NSW and Commonwealth Governments to keep the supply of coal flowing.³⁶

The coal famine in Victoria was the most pronounced effect of the coal strike. The streets of Melbourne went unlit, much to the delight of the men and women who rioted there on a number of occasions in September. Victoria was forced to ration domestic use of gas and electricity to eight and a half hours per day.³⁷ A large number of private manufacturing concerns were shut down. Melbourne's boot and match factories were too low a priority to receive government assistance with their coal supplies. The numbers laid off work in Melbourne were nearly as large as the number on strike.³⁸ Most important, however, was the rail system, which still maintained a virtual monopoly of freight delivery within the state. Yet, despite some restrictions in service, the Victorian Railways continued to run. How they did so is indicative of the overall situation with coal stocks.

The Victorian Railways in 1917 required 600,000 tons of coal a year to function normally.³⁹ This translates to 11,538 tons a week or 1,643 tons per day. The Wonthaggi mine, which was owned by the State Government and run specifically to supply the railways, produced 190,000 tons a year – 3,653 tons a week or 520 tons per day.⁴⁰ A decision was made not to use NSW coal on the railways during the strike, as this was likely to provoke a walkout by Victorian rail staff. The coal from Richmond

³⁵ Powell, *Uncertain Frontiers*, p.92.

³⁶ See, for instance, NSA, 9/4761, Inwards Correspondence, Premier's Department, telegrams between Fuller and Hughes, 14 - 18 September 1917, regarding their efforts to arrange a shipment of coke to Port Pirie via various steamers which were hampered by delays in securing crews and in loading the coke in Sydney. The difficulties in obtaining crews and the nearness of running out are also attested to in the BHAS correspondence (see note 32). For example, a letter from the Smelter Manager to the Head Office of the company, dated 15 September 1917, predicted that they would run out of coal by 28 September. They obtained coal from the steamer *Kooyong* on 25 September – though the wharfies appear to have been deliberately slow in unloading it - and from the *Carina* on 29 September.

³⁷ *Newcastle Herald & Miners' Advocate*, 24 September 1917, p.4: 'After Thursday the use of gas and electricity in private houses, hotels, and restaurants [in Victoria] will be allowed only between the hours of 5 a.m. and 8 a.m., and 5 p.m. and 10.30 p.m.'

³⁸ *Argus*, 28 September 1917, p.5, for instance, mentions 500 boot makers, 600 matchmakers and 2,000 confectionary employees as being laid off; *Age*, 10 September 1917, p.5, stated that 20,000 Victorian workers were on strike or laid off; Bureau of Census & Statistics, *Strike Crisis*, July 1918, p.123, estimated that 3-8,000 were laid off in Victoria and as many as 22,000 were on short time during the length of the strike.

³⁹ VPRS, Premier's Department Correspondence, 1163/P/508, Memo from Chief Storekeeper, Victorian Railways, 'Coal for Victorian Railways' 24 November 1917.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

and Pelham Mains was, therefore, provided to the gas and electricity companies.⁴¹ The railways relied on a substantial reserve of 105,000 tons which it held at the beginning of the strike.⁴² Wonthaggi was only on strike from 20 August to 9 September. From 8-19 August it would have produced approximately 5,720 tons, and from 10 September to 5 October (when the NSW miners returned to work) it would have produced around 13,000 tons. By the end of the strike, the reserves on hand were reduced to 40,000 tons.⁴³ This represented three and a half week's supply, though there would have been a curtailment of services well before that date as Maitland coal, needed to run express trains, had run out.⁴⁴ The Victorian Railways could have run for somewhat longer, but the idea that there were vast reserves on hand, presented so forcefully in the government propaganda during the strike, and echoed by Childe, is clearly false.

Even if the Victorian Government had been willing to supply the railways with coal from the two mines in NSW, it is doubtful whether they would have made much difference to the situation. The operation of Richmond Main and Pelaw Main was poorly organised. Two of the Victorian scabs, who abandoned Richmond Main soon after arriving, alleged that there was inadequate food and shelter, that there were few experienced miners amongst the ranks, and that there was no-one to tell them what to do.⁴⁵ The Victorian policeman in charge of the escort at Richmond Main complained that when the first miners arrived at Pelaw Main on 4 October there was no accommodation available. He also stated that the scabs at Richmond Main were winning only three hundred tons a day – a few days before the strike was ended and that Pelaw Main had yet to begin operation.⁴⁶ As Table 1 shows, the total produced from these two mines was only 7,407 tons between them during the strike – about a week's supply for the Victorian Railways, even if its use on the railways had been contemplated.

Extrapolating from the figures provided above, regarding the average amount of coal produced per day at Wonthaggi, we can assume that, if Wonthaggi had not

⁴¹ VPRS, Premier's Department Correspondence, 1163/P/508, Memo from Chairman, Coal Board, to 'Minister', 16 January 1918.

⁴² 'Coal for Victorian Railways'.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ *Newcastle Herald*, 6 October 1917, p.7.

⁴⁶ VPRS, Chief Secretary's Office, Inwards Correspondence, 4723/P0000/499, Report of Sergeant P. Thomas (police escort at Richmond Main), 5 October 1917.

returned to work in September, the Victorian Railways would probably have had only 27,000 tons left at the end of the strike. This represents only 16.4 days' supply of coal. If Wonthaggi had been called out at the beginning of the strike and struck for the duration, the reserves would have been reduced to 21,280 tons – thirteen days' supply. Of course, there are a number of intangibles left out of such an estimate, such as, for instance, the effect of a curtailed service – of rationing and economies. Nevertheless, it is clear that the cutting off of supply from Wonthaggi would have led to a much more rapid diminution of already dwindling reserves.⁴⁷

This basic strategic point seems to have evaded the consciousness of the miners' leaders. Baddeley complained in late August, in response to the Government's ultimatum regarding the impending recruitment of scabs, that:

As a proof that we are 'playing the game,' our members in Tasmania, Victoria, and Queensland are still working; and we have even gone so far as to issue instructions to our members to keep the mines free from water, feed the horses, and do everything that was desired to protect the mines, both underground and on the surface, in order that when this crisis terminated work can be immediately resumed in the collieries...⁴⁸

No attempt was made to shut off supply from Wonthaggi to the Victorian Railways. When the Wonthaggi miners did go on strike on 20 August⁴⁹, they did so despite the efforts of officials at both state and federal levels to keep them at work.⁵⁰ When they returned to work on 9 September, the officials did nothing to try and keep them out. Even in NSW itself the strike was never total. The union did its patriotic duty, ensuring that supplies of coal were sent to the Small Arms Factory in Lithgow, even

⁴⁷ One possible objection to this argument is the likelihood that the Victorian Government may have used scabs at Wonthaggi – something they threatened to do at the time. However, a report from the Victorian Railway Commissioners, produced in late August 1917, produced no less than seven reasons why this course was impossible. The most cogent of these were the fact that the seam at Wonthaggi was too narrow to be worked by unskilled labour and the likelihood that the railway staff would refuse to carry coal hewn by scabs. See VPRS, Premier's Department Correspondence, 1163/P/508, Memo from Railway Commissioners, 27 August 1917.

⁴⁸ *Newcastle Herald*, 20 August, p.5.

⁴⁹ *Age*, 21 August 1917, p.5, *Argus*, 21 August 1917, p.5, *Sun*, 21 August 1917, p.5.

⁵⁰ According to the *Sun*, 29 August 1917, p.5: 'When the men heard that Mr. Willis, general secretary of the Coal and Shale Miners' Federation, had been arrested, they ceased work on their own volition, said Mr. McVickers, secretary of the Victorian District of the Australasian Coal Miners' Federation, today. The executive of the Coal Miners' Federation in Sydney, he said, advised the Wonthaggi members, who number nearly 900, to remain at work. That advice was endorsed by the Victorian executive at a meeting held at Wonthaggi on August 19, but when the men saw in the press that the New South Wales Government had arrested Mr. Willis they ceased work without consulting the executive.'

after Willis had been arrested and two of the mines in the Lithgow District opened with scab labour.⁵¹

The failure to extend the strike was matched by a disarming overconfidence regarding the danger of scabbing. When the first scabs arrived at the Wallarah pit, at Catherine Hill Bay south of Newcastle, they were camped in a location that ensured a daily walk through the pit village to their work.⁵² No attempt was made to harass or intimidate them, beyond the odd catcall, let alone to picket – a policy of quiescence endorsed and encouraged by their officials.⁵³ Baddeley was contemptuous of the potential mining ability of the scabs:

Referring to the operations at Wallarah and Burwood Extended, he said the board was not alarmed, as the class of men offering, university students and such, would not find coal mining as conducive to their appearances as their class studies. They were not likely to remain long enough at the collieries to qualify as expert miners.⁵⁴

At one level he was correct. As we have seen, the scabbing operation was unable to achieve any significant winning of coal. Scabs could, however, shovel a significant proportion of the coal reserves at grass into wagons. The coal at grass had, in its own way, to be 'won'. This battle was conceded by the union without a fight. Nor did the failure to picket the mines ensure, in the end, that there was no violence. It simply ensured that whatever violence occurred was ineffective – random acts born of desperation. There was an attempt to blow up the bridge that connected Wallarah mine to the pier where the coal was loaded.⁵⁵ There were a number of acts of attempted sabotage to railway lines in the mining districts.⁵⁶ There was the fatal

⁵¹ *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners' Advocate*, 31 August 1917, p.4, quotes Willis: 'All miners in the State are not out. Men are getting coal for the Small Arms Works, and on some of the smaller mines men have not come out.'

⁵² *Daily Telegraph*, 3 September 1917, p.6.

⁵³ *Daily Telegraph*, 27 August 1917, p.6, reported that 'Mr. W. Brennan, secretary of the Colliery Employees' Federation, said he was out at Wallarah yesterday, and appealed to the men to take no notice of what happened, and if the mine was fully manned by free labor to keep away from it entirely and conduct themselves as they had done up to the present.'

⁵⁴ *Daily Telegraph*, 3 September 1917, p.6.

⁵⁵ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 30 August 1917, p.7: 'An attempt was made early this morning [29 August] to destroy the trestle bridge, over which the railway private coal line from Wallarah Colliery to the jetty passes. Two charges of explosives were placed in position in the piles about two feet above the sand of the beach, and the explosion all but severed the piles...'

⁵⁶ See, for instance, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 September 1917, p.11: 'At Singleton a stone weighing about 60lb was found on the railway line, near the Rosedale Colliery.' Also, see *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 September 1917, p.8: 'An attempt was made last night to wreck the passenger train from Sydney to Wollongong by placing a kerosene tin of heavy bolts on four feet of railway line between

shooting of a scab train driver at Coledale, which led to an unsuccessful attempt to frame two miners.⁵⁷ And, finally, there was a spontaneous riot when the first scabs arrived in Lithgow.⁵⁸ This riot, though unorganised, appears in fact to have discouraged some of the scabs, which raises the possibility that serious picketing may have had some success.⁵⁹ Unfortunately, nothing was done to follow this up. The ‘volunteers’ who were sent to the mines did so in the relatively firm knowledge that they would be unmolested, which was no doubt a solace and comfort to the parents of the public school boys and university students who formed a substantial proportion of their number.⁶⁰

In his history of the Miners’ Federation, Edgar Ross, concluded that:

The strike had again demonstrated that any industrial stoppage covering key industries will inevitably be seen by the State as a challenge to its authority and fought along naked class lines, utilising all instruments of oppression available and showing no mercy to the defeated. It also demonstrated the futility in such a situation of a defensive approach such as that adopted by the Defence Committee.⁶¹

Bellambi and Corrimal...While passing under one of the overhead bridges a signalman was subjected to a fusillade of stones.’

⁵⁷ See above, Chapter Four, page 98.

⁵⁸ *Daily Telegraph*, 6 September 1917, p.8: ‘There was some excitement at Lithgow shortly before 2 o’clock this afternoon, when 102 volunteer labourers, accompanied by a number of police, arrived to work at the Lithgow Valley Company’s pit. The carriages conveying the men were shunted right up to the pit mouth. Their arrival was kept a secret until the last moment, when news spread like wildfire, and a crowd of 500 or 600 assembled near the fences of the Lithgow Valley Colliery Company’s property. When the volunteer labourers made their appearance they had a stormy greeting, and this continued until the train moved off, having discharged the men with their luggage and some mining material. At this point a stone was thrown by some onlooker. Immediately the police, uniformed and in plain clothes, rushed the crowd, which was in an excited mood, with batons drawn. Several scuffles ensued, and two men were arrested. The crowd rushed down Lithgow-street in pursuit of the officers, and a little further along there was another scuffle, in which one of the arrested men fell, striking his head upon a kerbstone. The crowd continued to follow, and boo-hoed the police and cheered the prisoners until the police station was reached...The town is in a simmer of excitement this evening.’

⁵⁹ *Daily Telegraph*, 7 September 1917, p.6: ‘LITHGOW, Thursday [6 September]: Perhaps owing to yesterday’s demonstration, six volunteers left Lithgow by one of the mail trains early this morning.’

⁶⁰ See, for instance, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 31 August 1917, p.6, describing the scabs at Wallarah: ‘Most of the Great Public Schools were represented in the ranks of the wheelers.’ NSA, Chief Secretary’s Office, Inwards Correspondence, 5/75/3, Police Report of Aggregate Meeting at Greta 18 September 1917, cites the following comment regarding scabs from a local lodge official which shows the extent of naivety regarding the effectiveness of respectable protest: ‘Do not give them an opportunity – the same as they did in strikes gone by – of going and getting the Gatling guns. We don’t want to give them any opportunity. We believe that public opinion will be so changed in a short period, that at least we will get justice, and if any of these gentlemen come along here, take him to Mr Palmer (this was referring to a local hotel-keeper near by) and give him a glass of beer.’

⁶¹ Edgar Ross, *A History of the Miners’ Federation of Australia*, Sydney: ACSEF, 1970, p.294.

He could have extended that analysis to the leadership of the miners. The reluctance of Willis and Baddeley to recommend or endorse strike action may be understandable, given the reserves held by the Government, but once the strike had begun, more, arguably, would have been gained by extending it rather than limiting it. However reluctantly, they were launched into a conflict with opponents willing to fight with almost all the resources at their disposal. To win that fight would have required an equal level of determination and aggression on their part. It was not forthcoming.

It is not possible, whatever the advantages of hindsight, to arrive at a definitive answer to the question of whether the strike could have been won in 1917. Precisely because alternative strategies and tactics were not tried, their validity was never tested. Still, two particular counter examples point to the possibility that more aggressive tactics may have won. The first example is Broken Hill. The movement in Broken Hill was clearly in the vanguard of the Australian labour movement during World War One. The underground miners at the Barrier, organised by the AMA, began the wartime strike wave with their successful 44-hour week campaign in late 1915 and early 1916. They did so in the face of furious condemnation by the authorities and the press. The stockpiles of concentrates that had been built up by 1917 were as yet non-existent, so the strike threatened the supply of lead to the Allied war effort. The surface workers refused to join the strike and their craft unions split to form their own Trades and Labor Council. The Port Pirie men refused to strike as well, standing up and singing 'God Save the King' after voting down the strike motion at their mass meeting. The reaction of the underground men was to strike anyway and to set up mass pickets. Within a few weeks Port Pirie began to run out of concentrates, and in February, after a month on strike, the underground men had won the 44-hour week.⁶²

The extraordinary defiance shown by the underground miners at Broken Hill, both in fighting for shorter hours in the first place in the middle of the war and in continuing the fight despite their isolation from the rest of the labour movement, is a tribute to the politics of the core of politicised militants who dominated the AMA. A solid cadre of revolutionaries, with various forms of socialist and syndicalist politics, led the battle and in the months that followed extended their political influence over the miners. The conscription referendum in late 1916, the formation of the Labor

⁶² George Dale, *An Industrial History of Broken Hill*, Melbourne: Fraser and Jenkinson, 1918, pp.185-206.

Volunteer Army, and the election of one of their number, Percy Brookfield, as an independent Labor member to the state parliament in early 1917, all served to deepen the radical milieu on the Barrier in the eighteen months between the 44-hour victory and the Great Strike.⁶³ The Labor Volunteer Army (LVA) was formed at an anti-conscription meeting at Broken Hill's Central Reserve on 16 July 1916. Headed by Brookfield, within a fortnight it claimed 800 members.⁶⁴ Its oath of membership could not have cut more sharply against the grain of wartime patriotism:

I _____, being fully convinced that the conscription of life and labor in Australia will result in the workers of this land being crushed into subjection by a capitalist military oligarchy, do hereby pledge myself to the working class of Australia that I will resist by every means in my power any attempt to compel me or any of my comrades in this organisation to break this pledge, even though it may mean my imprisonment or death. And I will take this pledge voluntarily and freely, knowing that if I break it I will be branded as a traitor to my class.⁶⁵

By the time it was disbanded, at the end of the war, the membership of the LVA still numbered between twelve and fifteen hundred – in a town with a total population of around 20,000.⁶⁶

By August 1917 there was little surprise, then, that the Broken Hill miners joined the strike movement. The main difference was that, this time, the surface workers also struck, with the craft unions of the Barrier Trades and Labor Council joining the AMA to ensure a complete shutdown of the line of lode. If the government and employers had not been able to break the 1916 strike, it was clear that they would not succeed this time. So there was no attempt to organise a scabbing operation. In any case the mine reportedly had only one week's supply of coal when the strike began. Reserves of concentrates at Port Pirie were sufficient to ride out a long strike.⁶⁷ As long as the smelter at Port Pirie was kept operating and supplied with coal, the supply of lead to the war industries in Britain could be maintained.

Roper, *Labor's Titan*.

⁶⁴ NSA, 7/5588.1, Police Special Bundles, Police Report on LVA, 29 November 1918.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ NLA, ORAL TRC 341, 'Interviews with Five Miners from Broken Hill', Interview with W.S. (Shorty) O'Neil: 'Hughes made an agreement with the British government during the war that they would take all the concentrates that Broken Hill could produce. So they had it stacked everywhere from here to Port Pirie.' UMA, BHAS Papers, Box 207, BHAS, Director's Report, 14 June 1917, stated that: 'The company owes it to [the workers in the smelter] to ensure that their means of

Broken Hill, then, provides a curious but incomplete example of a different approach to that taken by the Defence Committee. In the raid on the mine and the successful expulsion from the town of the South Australian police can be seen the immense frustration of a group of workers who had mastered the tactics necessary for victory, but, through no fault of their own, found themselves in a strategically irrelevant section of the battlefield. If the government had needed to send scabs to Broken Hill, they most likely would have been driven out of town; but they had no such need. The political lessons learned by the underground miners in 1916 insulated them from the crippling effects of wartime patriotism. Now the underground miners had won over the rest of the labour movement in the town; by 1917, the immunity from patriotic appeals had spread to the workers above ground as well. Unfortunately, the workers at the Port Pirie smelter had no such immunity, and while the wharfies at Port Pirie were influenced by the more radical traditions of Broken Hill, they lacked the leadership that had helped steel the underground miners to fight through isolation and opprobrium during the 44-hour week battle.

The other counter example comes from Perth in 1919. The Fremantle waterfront had stuck during the Great Strike. They struck, not in sympathy with the movement in the Eastern states, but around the issue of wheat exports.⁶⁸ Nevertheless, the eastern example inspired the West Australian government to set up its own 'National Service Bureau' and, once the strike was broken, to reward the volunteers with preference.⁶⁹ By late 1918, returned soldiers began to appear in numbers looking for work on the wharves, and in Fremantle, as in the east, they were organised into a Returned Soldiers' Association (RSA). The soldiers found they had grievances and the leader of the Fremantle Lumpers Union, Bill Renton, who lost two

livelihood is not imperilled by possible labour troubles with which they have no concern at Broken Hill. Heavy reserve stocks of concentrate are therefore being carried to Port Pirie.'

⁶⁸ There is, nevertheless, some overlap between the Fremantle strike and the strike movement in the eastern states. For instance, the *West Australian*, 14 August 1917, p.5, states, citing the secretary of the Fremantle Lumpers, Mr. F. Rowe, that 'Industrial matters had taken such a serious turn in the Eastern States that he believed that the men here considered that they should act in accordance with those in Melbourne in preventing the export of foodstuffs overseas.' Later the *Daily Telegraph*, 24 August, p.4, reporting on the situation in Fremantle, stated that the wharfies had refused to return to work as 'Individual talk of men indicated a resumption, but on the conclusion of a meeting of the union this morning it was announced that, pending hearing of the attitude of the eastern States, the men would not resume'.

⁶⁹ *Sun*, 25 August 1917, p.6, 'The [West Australian] Government is determined to fight the strikers. Offices for recording the names of volunteers for national service have been opened in Perth and Fremantle.'

sons at the front just weeks before the armistice, was just the person to effect a strategic alliance with the RSA.⁷⁰

In early 1919, Perth was tightly quarantined against the threat of Spanish Influenza. The operation of the new transcontinental railroad was suspended, and the scab union and the Fremantle lumpers both agreed that ships would not be unloaded until they had served quarantine. When the scabs decided to break this agreement and unload the newly arrived '*Dimboola*', the wharfies felt they had the moral authority to go on the offensive.⁷¹ On 4 May, the Premier of Western Australia, Hal Colebatch, led a boatload of scabs down the Swan River, confident that barricades and a large contingent of armed police would be sufficient to protect them. Thousands turned up to give the Premier a civic, but not civil, reception. They dismantled the barricades and threw them into the Swan River. After the police bayonet-charged the mass pickets, injuring Renton and killing one wharfie, the returned soldiers, some of whom were armed, helped turn the tide.⁷² The premier, the scabs and the police were driven out of Fremantle. The police even had to abandon their station in Fremantle for a period. More importantly, the government was forced to close down the Bureau and the waterfront was cleared of scabs.⁷³

The contrast with the Sydney waterfront, where, as we shall see in Chapter Seven, the scab union was to remain in operation for most of the twenties, is stark. In Sydney, Morris and the national leadership spent much of 1919 enforcing industrial

⁷⁰ ANU, NBA, N28/6, Minutes, Fremantle Branch of WWF: 29 September 1918, 'Mr Renton explained that the object of calling members together was to explain to them that at present it appears that a good deal of dissatisfaction exists in connection with the method of engaging labour for work on the wharf, Returned Soldiers were treated in a most shameful manner by the Employers.'; 28 October 1918, the minutes contain a motion of condolence to Renton on the loss of his two sons at the front; 25 November 1918, a delegation from the Returned Soldiers Association is greeted with a motion declaring that 'our books are still open'.

⁷¹ *West Australian*, 10 April 1919, p.4 & 12 April 1919, p.6. The *Dimboola* had arrived with twenty influenza cases amongst its passengers. Against previous practice, the authorities had quarantined the passengers and fumigated the ship rather than quarantining the whole vessel. *West Australian*, 14 April 1919, p.4 cites the secretary of the scab union as denying that there had been any agreement between the two unions not to break quarantine.

⁷² Stuart Macintyre, *Militant: The Life and Times of Paddy Troy*, Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1984, p 9., relates a memory of the future Communist leader of the Fremantle wharfies (then a teenager): 'One particular episode at the Esplanade meeting [that preceded the riot] remained vivid in Paddy's memory. A man standing next to his father opened his coat to reveal a fuse protruding from the inside pocket, and said: "They taught us to make these in the trenches and we have not forgotten how". Paddy's father explained that it was a jam-tin bomb.'

⁷³ *West Australian*, 5 May 1919, p.5; See also: B. K. De Garis, 'An Incident at Fremantle', *Labour History*, Volume 10, 1966, pp. 32-37; B. Oliver, *Studies in Western Australian History no. XI*, Nedlands: University of Western Australia, 1991; B. Oliver, *War and Peace in Western Australia: The Social Impact of the Great War 1914-1926*, Nedlands: UWA Press, 1995; B. Oliver, *Unity is Strength: A History of the Australian Labor Party and the Trades and Labor Council in Western Australia, 1899-1999*, Perth: API Network, Australia Research institute, Curtin University of Technology, 2003.

peace in an effort to appease Justice Higgins.⁷⁴ That they were unable to keep a lid on their branch in distant Fremantle is not surprising. The minutes of the federal Committee of Management contain no mention of events in the west.⁷⁵ Isolation and distance allowed the not especially radical Fremantle Branch to respond to events and harness the violent energy of the returned soldiers without being bombarded by telegrams from Joe Morris instructing them to desist.

The Fremantle victory, then, can be attributed more to isolation than radicalisation. Nevertheless, it still illustrates the possibility that more aggressive tactics might have worked in 1917. In Fremantle they won in the face of guns and bayonets. The Defence Committee in Sydney in 1917 could mobilise up to 150,000 for its weekly processions. Yet those numbers were never mobilised to do anything more than protest. The obsession with respectability ingrained into a movement that had rebuilt itself in an industrial environment dominated by arbitration was too strong. The belief that, somehow, the mysterious force of public opinion would be won over to the side of the workers and overcome the power and the machinations of the employers and conservative governments held sway.

Could the strike have won? We cannot make that judgement. The possibility of victory or the certainty of defeat can often only be established in practice. They can only be determined by exhausting the strategic and tactical possibilities, and there are a number of such possibilities that were never explored. The strike could have been spread more widely and more rapidly, thereby inflicting more damage on the economy and stretching the resources of the government and its 'volunteer' army. An attempt could have been made to mobilise the thousands of strikers and their supporters to picket strategically important targets such as the wharves or the coal mines. This would, of course, have been dealt with by force, as the picketers in Fremantle experienced in 1919. There would have been violence, and possibly some deaths. The members of the LVA were willing to carry on the struggle regardless of 'imprisonment and death'. We can never know to what extent the rank and file in Sydney was of the same mind. Their leaders clearly were not.

Even more dramatic would have been the political consequences of such an approach. Whether it led to victory or defeat, it would have profoundly transformed

⁷⁴ See ANU, NBA, WWF Papers, T62/1/1, COM Minutes 19 May 1919, 14 June 1919, 12 July 1919 & 11 September 1919, also Z248/Box 98, Minutes of Sydney Branch WWF, 5 March 1919.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

working class politics in Australia, and perhaps destroyed the entire framework of arbitration and respectable trade unionism that arbitration entailed. It would have magnified the already seismic shift that had been engendered by the economic and political crises of the war. It is impossible to imagine the likes of Cooper, Morris or Kavanagh leading such a fight. For them, as was famously the case with the leadership of the British Trade Union Congress during the General Strike of 1926, the prospect of such a victory may have been, if anything, more awful than the prospect of defeat.

Chapter Seven: Revenge

'It is the duty of every trade unionist to throw this city into darkness.'

Tom Walsh, 19 July 1919.

The defeat of the Great Strike was complete and the aftermath was devastating. On the railways, the waterfront, and in some smaller workplaces, such as the flour mills and the Dunlop factory in Melbourne, a scab workforce was established with scab unions to compete with the defeated unions of the strikers.¹ In many other workplaces, militants were victimised. Even in the coal mines of NSW, for so long bastions of unionism, there were scabs ensconced in a number of mines and one, Richmond Main, was completely staffed by Victorian 'loyalists'. Twenty four NSW union bodies were deregistered and their state-based awards cancelled.² Moreover the Waterside Workers' Federation, whilst managing to avoid deregistration, had, nevertheless, had the all-important preference clause struck from its award in ports across the Commonwealth.

This picture of defeat is familiar to anyone who has read the invariably brief descriptions of the strike in the historical record. The usual summary is that the workers struck, without strategic sense, either due to an excess of enthusiasm for direct action or because they had been goaded to by conservative governments and employers. Then they were defeated and the 'straighteners' (in Manning Clark's

¹ UMA, Victorian Trades Hall Council (VTHC) Executive Minutes, 14 January 1918, contain a reference to a scab union called the 'Grain and Flour Mill Employees Union'. However, as the reference is made in the context of a discussion regarding the wheat stacks, it is not clear whether the union covered just the scabs who replaced the WWF members on the stacks or (as its name implies) the mill employees as well. Geoffrey Blainey's, *Jumping Over The Wheel*, St Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 1993, p.97, is a company history of Dunlop. Blainey does not mention any connection to the dispute and the hiring, during 1917, of around 700 scabs at Dunlop (see, for instance, *Age*, 8 October 1917, p.7). He states, regarding Dunlop's 'Share Purchase Association', that it was: 'Essentially a co-operative designed to encourage workers to invest in Dunlop shares and thus receive some of the profit in good years, the [Share Purchase Association] began to take on an industrial role. With 638 members at the start of 1918 it probably was entitled as the union to speak for the work-force, but was seen by the union as a gate-crasher, a mealy-mouthed upstart.' Clearly, the Share Purchase Association had become a sort of union for the remaining 'volunteers' from 1917.

² Jurkiewicz, *Conspiracy Aspects of the 1917 Strike*, Appendix H, p.74, lists the union bodies as: The Amalgamated and Australasian Societies of Engineers, the ARTSA, the Traffic Association, the Tramways Union, the LEDFCA, the Carrington Coal and Coke Shipping Union, the Newcastle and District Trolley Draymen and Carters' Union, the Timber Workers, the Sugar Workers, the Sydney Trolley, Draymen and Carters, the Storemen and Packers, the Wood and Coal Labourers, the Coal Lumpers, the FEDFA, the United Labourers' Protective Society, the Coke Workers' Association, the Ironworkers, the Liquor Trades Union, the Cold Storage and Ice Employees, the Gas Employees, the Coachmakers, the Wool and Basil Workers, and the Boilermakers.

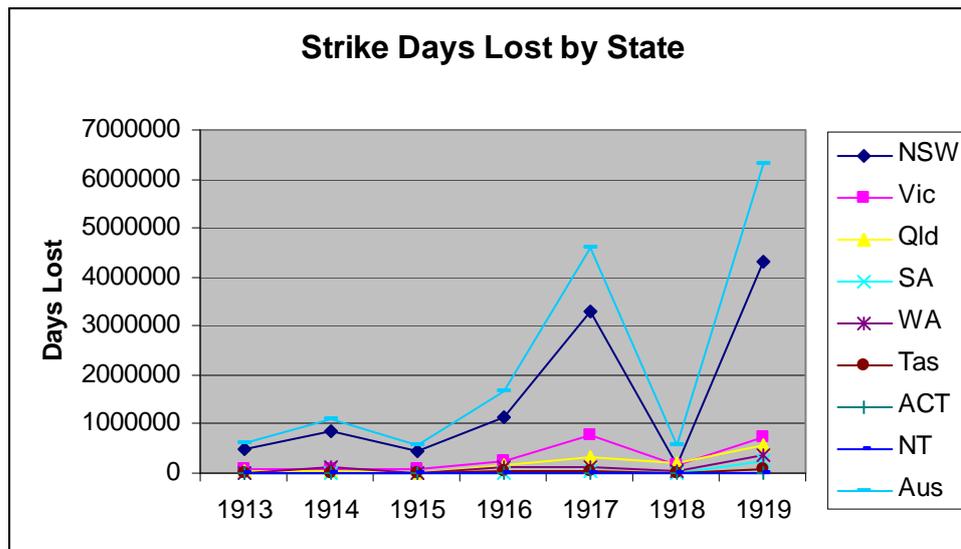
famous phrase) inflicted punishment.³ A focus on the unions purely as institutions involves an analysis of their membership figures and of their institutional strength, particularly the extent to which they were recognised by industrial courts and successful in obtaining awards. Many descriptions of the strike's aftermath focus on this aspect alone. In a history of the AWU, for instance, Hearn and Knowles wrote that:

The unions which were defeated and deregistered by the NSW Industrial Court in 1917 took years to rebuild - and only after the intervention of the law, when the Engineers' Case in 1920 paved the way for registration of unions of state-employed workers under the Commonwealth Conciliation and Arbitration Act, and the pursuit of federal awards. Several of the revived unions were just beginning this process, with new federal awards, in 1924, seven years after the strike.⁴

Such a focus is, however, one sided. While deregistration, by blocking access to arbitration, was a defeat for unions, it did not mean that they were unable to defend or even to improve their members' wages or conditions by other means, most notably by direct action. Arbitration had been established, as we saw in Chapter Five, to restrain unions as much as, if not more than, to help them. Its removal, particularly in situations where economic conditions encouraged and favoured industrial action, could be a two-edged sword for governments wishing to avoid industrial strife. We have already questioned whether defeat was inevitable in 1917; there is also reason to question how total that defeat was. Figure One shows the strike days lost from 1913 to 1919, broken down state by state. It shows the explosion in 1916 and 1917 and the dramatic collapse that followed in 1918. It reveals that in all these years (except 1918) the bulk of strike activity was in NSW.

³ Manning Clark, *History of Australia Volume VI: The Dead Tree and the Young Tree Green*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1987, pp.63-4. In the two brief paragraphs in which Clark deals with the strike, this is precisely the way he refers to it. The strikers are presented simply as victims of the perfidy of conservative politicians. In Clark's *A Short History of Australia*, Melbourne: Macmillan, 1981, there is no mention of the strike at all.

⁴ Mark Hearn and Harry Knowles, *One Big Union: A History of the Australian Workers Union 1886-1994*, Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1996, p.125.

Figure 1:⁵

It also shows that in 1919 there was another explosion of struggle in Australia. In fact the strike figures for 1919 actually exceeded those for 1917. The NSW dominance of these figures was, proportionately, slightly less in 1919 than in 1917 (down from 72 per cent to 68.5 per cent of the national total), but only because the smaller states also showed a dramatic increase. The strike movement in 1919 was greater in NSW and Qld than in 1917 and it was dramatically greater in South and Western Australia. Only in Victoria were there slightly fewer strike days lost than in 1917 – though, even there, there was a significant recovery from 1918. Such a dramatic recovery in strike figures, only twelve months after the Great Strike ended, belies the picture of devastation and demoralisation one would expect to be revealed in the aftermath of a great defeat. It demands a reassessment of the impact of the strike. The collapse of strike figures in 1918 appears, when viewed in this context, as a mere drawing of breath by the labour movement – as a parenthesis in an otherwise continuous strike wave that began in 1916 and was to continue into the early months of 1920.

An explanation for the rapid recovery from the defeat of 1917 is suggested by a shift to the left amongst official circles in the immediate aftermath of the strike. The Seamen's Union passed into the control of a new militant group of officials led by Tom Walsh, a member of the VSP who was to go on to be a founding member of the

⁵ Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics, *Monthly Summary of Australian Statistics*, Bulletins, 61-79, 1917-1920.

Communist Party. The Sydney Trades and Labour Council also found itself with a new leadership: Joe Kavanagh was replaced as secretary by Jock Garden, the leader of a group of officials that became known as the 'Trades Hall Reds'. Garden later played a part in the formation of the Communist Party in 1920. The sequence of events seems to be straightforward. We witnessed in Chapter Four the anger that greeted the ending of the strike. We now see that, in the following year, there was a replacement of right-wing officials by left-wing officials, and, almost immediately, a new explosion of strikes. A natural assumption is that significant groups of workers in NSW, angered at what they considered to be the betrayal by their officials in September 1917, took the opportunity to remove those officials and replace them with militant, even revolutionary leaders. Then, under this new leadership, they launched into a new round of strikes. The reality, however, is somewhat more complex than this.

The Trades Hall Reds were a peculiar phenomenon. They were undoubtedly very radical. Garden and his supporters helped form one of the two Communist Parties which competed for Comintern approval in 1920; the other was formed by the somewhat doctrinaire and sectarian Australian Socialist Party (ASP). Given the fight Lenin was waging against ultra-leftism in the Comintern at this time, there is little surprise that the Comintern preferred Garden's group, dominated as it was by union officials with real roots in the class, over the doctrinaire propagandists of the ASP.⁶ The Comintern leadership, however, was probably unaware that the radicalism of the Trades Hall Reds was much more theoretical than practical. Jock Garden had been a union delegate in the Clerks' Union who, after being victimised from a government job, had managed to obtain compensation in the form of a paid position at the Labor Council.⁷ It was from this position, rather than from an industrial base, that he propelled himself into the position of Labor Council secretary when Kavanagh retired to take up a government post in early 1918.⁸ Most of the rest of the 'Reds' were officials from minor craft unions.⁹ This reflects the fact, also shown in the

⁶Stuart Macintyre, *The Reds*, Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1998, pp. 21-5. A key role in determining the Comintern's attitude to the two competing factions appears to have been played by the Soviet consul (unrecognised by the Australian Government), Peter Simonoff.

⁷ Arthur Hoyle, *Jock Garden: The Red Parson*, Canberra: A.R. Hoyle, 1993, pp.8-9.

⁸ Dixon, *Reformists and revolutionaries*, p.12.

⁹MacIntyre, *The Reds*, p.17, lists some of Garden's allies as: Arthur Rutherford of the Saddlers, Jack Kilburn of the Bricklayers, Bo Webster of the Miscellaneous Workers' Union, and Chris Hook of the Municipal Workers. The latter two were not, strictly speaking, craft unions, but nor were they unions of any great size or militancy.

composition of the VSP's delegates to the Victorian Trades Hall¹⁰, that it was generally easier for socialists to capture official positions in small unions than in the big industrial unions. (In any case, most of the larger industrial unions were not affiliated to the Labor Council.¹¹) It also rules out the simplistic scenario that the capture of the Labor Council by the 'Reds' was a consequence of right-wing officials in the big industrial unions losing support from their members after the 'sell-out' of 1917, as the 'Reds' generally did not represent unions that had been involved in the strike.

This also helps explain the fact that, for all their rhetoric about Russia and revolution and the One Big Union, the Trades Hall Reds were, as Dixson observed, not at all militant industrially.¹² They did develop an industrial base after taking control of the Trades Hall (as Dixson has also shown), building a network of supporters in most of the industrial unions as well as the small unions they officially represented.¹³ In addition, some of the leaders of more significant industrial unions, such as Claude Thompson of the ARTSA and Timothy McCristal of the Sydney Wharf Labourers, became allies of the 'Reds'. Neither of these unions had been affiliated to Trades Hall, but the ARTSA did so after the accession of Jock Garden to the position of secretary.¹⁴ The Sydney Wharf Labourers rejected affiliation,¹⁵ but McCristal was heavily involved, along with Claude Thompson of the ARTSA, in the OBU agitation and the political fight between, on the one hand, the 'industrialists', led by Willis of the Coal Miners and the Trades Hall Reds, and, on the other hand, the right-wing leadership of the NSW Labor Party in 1919.¹⁶ Mobilising this industrial base for strike activity, however, was not a priority for the 'Reds'. Garden, in any

¹⁰ See Chapter Two, note 63.

¹¹ Turner, *Industrial Labour & Politics*, p.182.

¹² Dixson, *Reformists and Revolutionaries*, p.139.

¹³ Miriam Dixson, *Greater Than Lenin?: Lang and Labor 1916-1932*, Melbourne: University of Melbourne, Politics Department, 1977, p.62: (Citing in support an anonymous pamphlet, *Chronological Notes of the History of the Australian Communist Party, c.1942*), she states: 'Supporting these prominent Trades Hall Reds was a network of informal rank and file red union cells, which probably arose during the anti-conscription referenda campaign, and no doubt also played a part in the campaign to release the IWW Twelve'.

¹⁴ ANU, NBA, Australian Railways Union Papers, P103/1, Minutes of ARTSA Executive, 7 September 1918.

¹⁵ ANU, NBA, WWF Papers, Z248/Box 98, Minutes of Sydney Branch of WWF, 23 October 1918.

¹⁶ Dan Coward, *The Impact of War on New South Wales: Some Aspects of Social and Political History 1914-1917*, Unpublished PhD Thesis, ANU, 1974, p.308, records that, at the OBU conference on 2 September 1919, it was Claude Thompson who moved the motion in favour of the OBU. See note 63 below for McCristal's involvement in the OBU.

case, preferred to use radical rhetoric to excuse industrial passivity. In a report covering the year in which NSW workers had struck in record numbers, he wrote:

Surely in this day we can use a more scientific weapon than the obsolete weapon of the strike...let us...lay aside the strike weapon until the movement is thoroughly organised along scientific lines that will make it an efficient weapon.¹⁷

In other words, strike action should be postponed until the One Big Union was proclaimed and organised. It would be wrong to assume, in any case, that the enthusiasm for the OBU was a pure and unmitigated expression of syndicalism. There had always been a tendency for some trade union officials to see the OBU as a consolidation of bureaucratic power rather than as a powerful instrument of class war. As is noted in Chapter Five, there was a struggle in the VSP over different conceptions of the one big union as early as 1915, with Frank Hyett of the VRU arguing successfully for a top down model based upon bureaucratic amalgamations.¹⁸ The contradiction between the two different conceptions of the OBU was expressed neatly by H.E. Boote of *The Worker*, who, in a post-mortem of the Great Strike, argued simultaneously that ‘no executive should have the power to call a strike, or declare one off’, and that ‘the men must not be allowed to strike “on impulse”’.¹⁹ The OBU was a Janus faced entity. To the left it appealed as the promise of a syndicalist dream, and it helped that the preamble of the proposed union was taken largely from the IWW:

Capitalism can only be abolished by the workers uniting in one class-conscious economic organisation to take hold of the means of production by revolutionary industrial and political action.²⁰

To many officials such as Claude Thompson, it appealed, as Dixon has argued, because it would increase their power over the rank and file and prevent a repeat of 1917.²¹ In the end, the movement came to nothing, and the energy of much of the left during this year of tumult was wasted.

¹⁷ Annual Report of the NSW Trades and Labor Council, 31 December 1919, p.8, cited in: Dixon, *Reformists and Revolutionaries*, p.139.

¹⁸ See Chapter Five, note 55.

¹⁹ *Worker*, 13 September & 4 October 1917, cited in Turner, *Industrial Labour & Politics*, p.160.

²⁰ Dixon, *Reformists and Revolutionaries*, p.13.

²¹ *Ibid.*

The case of the Seamen's Union, by contrast, presents a picture much closer to the explanation suggested above: a leftwards shift in response to the defeat of 1917 which in turn led to a revival in 1919. Tom Walsh had been active in the Seamen's Union for many years. He had briefly been a member of the Sydney Branch Executive as early as 1912, at which time he had not shown any inclination to behave any differently from the more moderate officials who sat alongside him on that body. He played a key role that year, for instance, in discouraging the Sydney seamen from joining a strike of Queensland seamen.²² He was, however, active in socialist circles during the war. He (pseudonymously) contributed articles to the IWW's *Direct Action*²³, and during the 1917 strike is recorded by the VSP's journal, the *Socialist*, as addressing meetings for the VSP in Melbourne.²⁴

In 1918, the union's federal general secretary, Cooper, who had played such a prominent and unpopular role during the Great Strike, resigned his position in order to take up a post on the NSW Board of Trade. The NSW secretary, a loyal follower of Cooper named Edwards, became acting general secretary and Walsh was elected branch secretary in his place. In early 1919, Walsh secured a narrow election win over Edwards (1,294 to 1,213) as general secretary, but his control of the federal union was insecure as many of Cooper's allies remained in position and Walsh supporters were a minority of the national committee. In February 1919 Australian seamen attempted to join a wages strike by New Zealand seamen sparked by the influenza danger. Officials in the Sydney branch, along with the majority of federal officials, withheld their support and only the Queensland branch remained on strike. Walsh supported the strike but was unable to win the vote on the national committee to give it official support. With the backing of the discontented militants, as well as the Victorian branch, which was still resentful of its treatment in 1917, Walsh won a resounding victory in a fresh ballot in May – this time with a majority of his supporters on the national committee.²⁵ On 20 and 21 May the Victorian and NSW branches rejoined the strike alongside the Queensland branch. They did so without

²² Ibid, pp. 187-8.

²³ Macintyre, *The Reds*, p.18, states that he wrote under the by-line 'Sinbad the Sailor'.

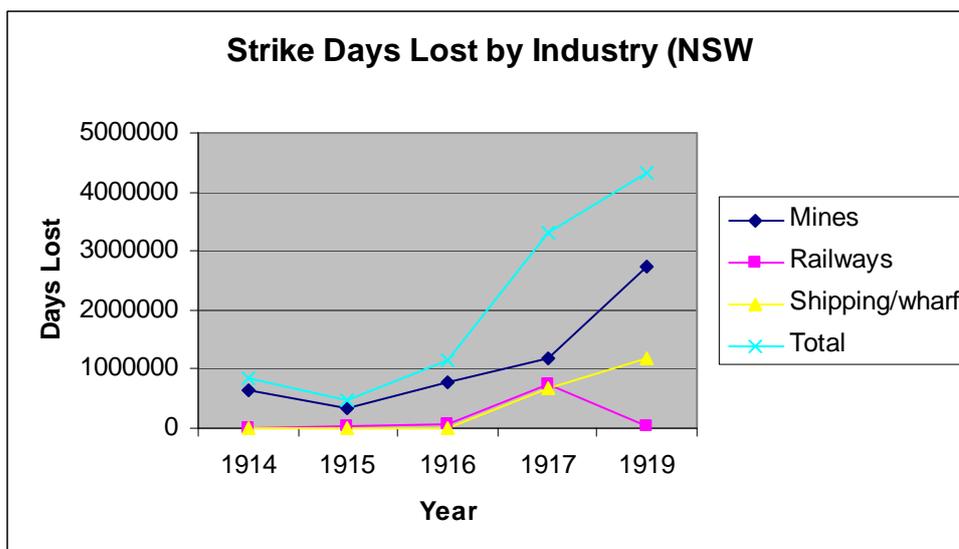
²⁴ *Socialist*, 7 September 1917, p.3.

²⁵ Dixon, *Reformists and Revolutionaries*, pp.187-8. Dixon's thesis, written in 1965, appears (the footnotes are not entirely clear) to have relied upon the memories of former officials who would now, of course, be deceased. As well records of the union were lost in an office move – probably in the late 1980s. In any case, she provides the clearest and most comprehensible narrative of Walsh's rise to power – as is summarised here.

any official decision, with Walsh encouraging the members to take action ship by ship. This enabled him to avoid a bureaucratic entanglement with the remaining rump of conservative officials. The following month five members of the NSW executive resigned because ‘they did not believe in Direct Action’, leaving Walsh and his supporters in an even stronger position.²⁶

Walsh’s elevation to the leadership was, therefore, clearly associated with a push for militancy and this was in turn associated (especially in the case of the Victorian members who voted for him) with bitter memories of betrayal in 1917. His elevation was immediately followed by strike action – a dramatically successful strike which, as Figure 2 shows, was responsible for a significant proportion of the strike days lost in 1919. The shipping/wharf sector saw 1,182,933 days lost to strikes in 1919 in NSW out of a total of 4,324,686 lost in all industries. This figure is 134 times the average for the sector in the three years 1914-1916.

Figure 2:²⁷



In explaining the genesis of the 1919 seamen’s strike, Turner points out that the seamen had a range of grievances that had not been dealt with due to the conservatism of their officials – a conservatism that was magnified by their addiction to wartime patriotism. Nevertheless, however compelling their grievances were, it

²⁶ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 June 1919.

²⁷ Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics, *Labour and Industrial Branch Reports*, No’s 6,7 & 8, 1916-18. *Monthly Summary of Australian Statistics*, Bulletins 76-78, 1919. Figures giving a breakdown by industry for 1918 are not available, hence their absence on this chart.

would be hard to imagine such a dramatic transformation in the leadership of a union without a significant transformation at the union's base. The experience of 1917 provided the militant culture that allowed Walsh to defy the conventions of arbitration and union legality in a dramatic and uncompromising fashion, secure in the support of his members. He made a point of refusing to obey the orders of any court and positively invited the arrest, which duly followed.²⁸ He also made explicit his opposition to arbitration. Walsh's key ally on the union executive, Le Cornu, the new national president, followed the same line, arguing that: 'He [Higgins] said we have deliberately flouted the court. I admit that, and we are going to flout it for all time.'²⁹ Walsh and Le Cornu were able to exhibit this defiance confident that they had a militant base within the union. Evidence of the militancy of the rank and file is abundant. In a secret report on the strike prepared for the Prime Minister, it was revealed that before one of the strike processions 'some of the strikers' asked President Joyce of the Trades Hall 'if he would advise them to carry firearms'.³⁰ More compelling is the fact that in late July, after Walsh's arrest, as the government agreed to consider terms, the members of both the Melbourne and Sydney branches of the union rejected the united recommendation of their officials, including Walsh loyalists, to return to work, insisting that they would not return until Walsh was released.³¹ Walsh wrote a letter from prison, pleading with his members to return. Meetings of members voted to thank him for his 'generous request that the question of his release shall not be a bar to further negotiations', but resolved not to heed it.³²

Pressure was brought to bear on the seamen by other unions as well as the government, and by late August the Victorians accepted the deal, but the NSW branch held out for an extra week and even briefly replaced the fiery Le Cornu with a more consistently militant representative.³³ In the end, they won most of their demands and Walsh was released – but the victory, won by direct action, was confirmed by the

²⁸ *Age*, 21 July 1917, p.11, records a speech given by Walsh to a meeting at the Socialist Hall in Melbourne on 19 July. As well as attributing to him the bellicose line cited at the beginning of this chapter, the report adds: 'He hoped the Government was not going to evade its responsibility in locking him up.' The same article describes Walsh's court appearance the next day, where he delivered his guilty plea 'in a loud voice'.

²⁹ *Age*, 9 June 1919, p.6.

³⁰ NLA, W.M. Hughes Papers, MS1538, Series 18, 'Information on Seamen's Strike', 16 July 1919.

³¹ Dixon, *Reformists and Revolutionaries*, pp.136-7.

³² *Age*, 5 August 1919, p.5.

³³ *Age*, 18 August 1917, p.7.

arbitration commission and, as a consequence, the impact of Walsh's challenge to the system was blunted.³⁴

That the seamen were not the only group of workers with accumulated grievances is shown, not only by the general rise in strike figures in 1919 but by the impact of the seamen's strike in Melbourne and Sydney. What has not been recorded (except by Dixon) is how close it came to spilling over into a replay of 1917. A movement began to gather force to extend the strike to the coal miners and others with a view to linking the seaman's demands to other industrial issues, most notably the abolition of the Bureaus on the waterfront and the settlement of the strike that had begun in Broken Hill. The Trades Hall in Melbourne voted to 'take steps' to bring about an extension of the strike, and an interstate conference of unions was called for 21 July.³⁵ It was on the eve of this conference that Walsh was arrested. Willis and Baddeley of the Coal Miners took over the conference in his absence and argued against any extension, arguing instead that unionists should remain at work and support the seamen financially. They managed to carry the day, but not without a struggle.³⁶ That struggle would have been greater if the Trades Hall Reds had used their influence to push for an extension of the strike, but they did not.³⁷ Nor were they alone amongst the ranks of the fledgling Communist Party in playing a discreditable role in the affair. W.P. Earsman, a Melbourne official of the ASE who was to become the Party's first general secretary,³⁸ actually condemned the seamen's strike in the pages of the *International Socialist*.³⁹ The extension of the strike was then avoided, but it is hard to imagine that there was no connection between the threat of a general stoppage and the offer of terms by the government that followed almost immediately.⁴⁰

The strike was thus contained; a repeat of 1917 was averted, but there was, nevertheless, some extension beyond the ranks of the seamen. The seamen's strike was seized upon by the wharfies in Melbourne as an opportunity to regain their

³⁴ Turner, *Industrial Labour & Politics*, p.196.

³⁵ Cited in Dixon, *Reformists and Revolutionaries*, p.135.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p.139.

³⁸ MacIntyre, *The Reds*, pp. 21-5.

³⁹ *International Socialist*, 26 July 1919, p.1; Dixon, *Reformists and Revolutionaries*, p.128, asserts that there was opposition to Garden's 'confinement' policy within the new Communist Party, but that this opposition was muted due to a recognition that Garden had a mass base and his critics did not.

⁴⁰ *Age*, 28 July 1917, p.7, records Adela Pankhurst addressing a meeting of seamen and advising they return to work and accept the Government's offer. This was only a week after the conference, so the offer must have been made sometime in that week.

position. They had been carrying on an undeclared war on the scabs ever since their return to work in December 1917. The day after they returned to work, the secretary of the scab union wrote in complaint to the Commissioner of Police that the wharfies had started to 'terrorise and interfere' with his members.⁴¹ The scabs were kept separate by being given the lucrative deep-sea trade with a permanent police presence at Victoria Dock to protect them, but this could not be maintained indefinitely.⁴² The news in early May 1919 of the victory in Fremantle had a galvanising effect on the Melbourne Wharf Labourers' Union, which now had about four hundred returned servicemen amongst its members.⁴³ The *Age* warned on 15 May:

Developments that occurred yesterday indicate that trouble similar to that which happened at Fremantle within the last few weeks is impending...It is said that the loyalists, most of whom did not don khaki during the war, have been getting preference to the exclusion of returned soldiers who are members of the Wharf Laborers' Union.⁴⁴

A mass meeting was called for 18 May, but the Melbourne secretary of the union advised against taking action until it was clear what would happen with the seamen, whose strike was impending.⁴⁵ There were to be various attempts to link the wharfies' dispute formally with the seamen. All ran up against the hostility of the federal officials of the WWF (and some of the Victorian officials as well) to direct action in general and to Tom Walsh in particular.⁴⁶ The absence of a strike vote or collaboration between the officials from the two unions proved, however, to be no

⁴¹ VPRS, Police Department, Inwards Correspondence, 807/P0000/624, File W9850, Letter to Chief Commissioner from Australian Wharf Workers Association, 7 December 1917: 'As you are no doubt aware the members of the Wharf Lumpers' Union decided to register their names for employment through the Yarra Stevedoring Company. Now, the fact is, that having done so, they have already started to terrorise and interfere with members of the Association which is formed from the National Volunteers. Only to-day a case of brutal assault came under our notice, the injured person having to be taken to the hospital.'

⁴² VPRS, Police Department Correspondence, 807/P0000/624, File W9850, Police Report, 2 February 1918, stated that 3,000 former strikers were registered at the Yarra Stevedoring Bureau but that only one third were required. Regarding the scabs: 'The Victorian Bureau under Mr McLeod pick up for Deep Sea boats, Victoria Dock and the river where no trouble has occurred, but the presence of the Police is considered to be the cause of the order that prevails.'

⁴³ *Age*, 15 May 1919, p.7.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Age*, 19 May 1919, p.8.

⁴⁶ ANU, NBA, WWF Papers, T62/1/1, WWF COM Minutes, 14 June 1919, 'T. R. Clarke said...that he had taken the risk of going to that meeting as a representative of the COM of the WWF and that he did not believe in any Branch entering into agreements without first consulting the COM of the WWF and that the Federation would have been involved in the strike if he had not been present at that conference [of the Melbourne Wharfies and the Seamen's Union]'; 12 July 1919, 'Mr F. Riley in addressing the Committee said...his Committee [Melbourne Branch] had been able to keep the members from declaring a strike.'

barrier to joint action on the ground. The federal officials may have been hostile to the idea of taking action, but they were unable to prevent it.⁴⁷ The catalyst was the returned soldiers. The president of the Melbourne sub-branch of the Returned Sailors and Soldiers' Imperial League complained that:

...an attempt was being made by a certain section of the unionists on the wharves to use the returned soldier as a 'tool' to get rid of the 'loyalists'...he had actively [sic] seen returned soldiers being 'egged' on to attack 'loyalists' on the wharves. One man, wearing a returned soldier's badge, had thrown a 'loyalist' into the river. He had seen others assault several 'loyalists'. The unionists had loudly applauded, but they took care to keep out of the brawl themselves.⁴⁸

The seamen's strike provided an opportunity to transfer this war against the scabs from a war of attrition to something more substantial. The lack of work on the waterfront caused by the strike paradoxically strengthened the position of the established wharfies by discouraging many of the scabs. The remaining thirty members of the Original Volunteers' Association (one of two organisations representing the waterfront scabs) passed a motion in June announcing their intention of withdrawing from the wharves, complaining that 'a large number of the original loyalists have never received a living wage'.⁴⁹ The scabs clearly had little incentive to defy a campaign of intimidation and remain on the waterfront, when all they gained in return was a trickle of work.

Once the seaman had struck, the wharfies were faced with a choice that mirrored the choice faced by the seamen in 1917, when they had struck rather than work with scabs. As the seamen had in 1917, the wharfies in 1919 made that decision independently of their officials; they chose not to unload the strike-bound ships. Moreover, emboldened by the victory in Fremantle, by the seamen's strike, and by the presence of veteran soldiers in their ranks, they turned the harassment of the scabs into outright warfare. Already by 21 May, the day the seamen began walking off inter-state vessels in Melbourne,⁵⁰ the *Age* reported that four scabs had been hospitalised and that the wharfies had 'succeeded in driving the "loyalists" away from

⁴⁷ ANU, NBA, WWF Papers, T62/1/1, WWF COM Minutes, 19 May 1919. After a discussion of the dispute over the bureau in Melbourne, the COM moved 'that the Federation forbid any branch taking any action in reference to strikes, without the consent of the WWF'.

⁴⁸ *Age*, 21 May 1919, p.5.

⁴⁹ *Age*, 10 June 1919, p.5.

⁵⁰ *Age*, 20 May 1919, p.7, records that the crews of 20 vessels in Melbourne gave 24-hour notice that they would quit.

the vessels on which they were working'.⁵¹ The way in which they refused to work the ships was described vividly:

On Tuesday [20 May] some of the members of the Wharf Laborer's Union were engaged to assist in loading the *Grace Darling* at No. 11 shed on the North Wharf, but when the time for starting work arrived some of them called upon the 'dinkum' unionists to stand aside and they would see the 'scum of the earth'. The unionists stood aside, and the 'loyalists', being intimidated, left the vessel.⁵²

The intimidation of the scabs was not always so easy. On 23 May, seventeen scabs were working on the steamer *Monaro*, on the South Wharf. They were attacked by a group of wharfies who threw coal and coke at them as they worked. The arrival of twenty police restored order, but not for long.

It is related that subsequently a crowd of about 400 unionists visited the locality, and made overtures to the 'loyalists'. Intermediaries informed them that if they ceased work without delay they would be given a free passage to their homes, but that if they did not take advantage of the offer no quarter would be shown them.⁵³

Not surprisingly, the scabs took up the offer of a safe passage home. By the end of May the police had redoubled their efforts, protecting one group of scabs with a baton charge.⁵⁴ The special constables sworn in 1917 were recalled to duty and efforts were made to house the scabs at the waterfront.⁵⁵ It was, however, too little too late. Most of the scabs were gone, never to return; from around one thousand in December 1917, their numbers had dwindled to two hundred by the beginning of June 1919.⁵⁶ By the end of the seamen's strike in early August, the remaining 170 members of the scab union were reduced to approaching the Wharf Labourers Union for assistance in getting compensation in return for leaving the waterfront.⁵⁷

In Sydney, the situation was much grimmer for the WWF. As in Melbourne, the scabs had been given a virtual monopoly of the lucrative deep-sea trade. Unlike in

⁵¹ *Age*, 21 May 1919, p.9.

⁵² *Age*, 22 May 1919, p.7.

⁵³ *Age*, 24 May 1919, p.13.

⁵⁴ *Age*, 28 May 1919, p.9.

⁵⁵ VPRS, Police Department, Inwards Correspondence, 677/P000/94, letter from Police Commissioner to V.B. Trapp, 26 May 1919, nevertheless complains that of the five hundred special constables who had been sworn in in 1917 only fifty reported for duty and, as the rest had not returned their batons, it was impossible to enrol any more.

⁵⁶ *Age*, 2 June 1919, p.7.

⁵⁷ *Age*, 1 August 1917, p.7.

Fremantle or Melbourne, however, the arrival of returned soldiers on the waterfront had not been of benefit to the unionists. The returned soldiers in Sydney had set up their own union and, by June 1919, were as fed up with having to wait in line for work before the scabs (who in Sydney were organised by the Permanent and Casuals Union) as had their comrades in Melbourne and Fremantle. Several hundred returned soldiers marched to the Premier's office to complain about the lack of work on the waterfront, which they blamed partly on the fact that the 'Permanents' were willing to work for below award wages – something the returned servicemen would not stoop to.⁵⁸ They also approached the Sydney branch of the WWF with a view to amalgamation. Yet this promising situation was unable to be capitalised on. There was an obstacle in the path to unity, formed by the person of Timothy McCristal, the secretary of the NSW branch of the WWF, whose penchant for ultra-left rhetoric had resulted in his arrest in 1917.⁵⁹ He was at it again in January 1919 with a speech in which he described the returned soldiers on the waterfront as 'the diarrhoea class who only got as far as Cairo'.⁶⁰ When, later in 1919, the returned servicemen approached the local WWF branch for talks, the negotiations foundered on the mutual mistrust between McCristal and the leaders of the RSA.⁶¹

Neatly complementing McCristal's inopportune ultra-left rhetoric, albeit from a right-wing direction, was the desire of Joe Morris and the national COM of the WWF to avoid a strike in Sydney. The WWF had high hopes of obtaining a new national award from Justice Higgins, with a long overdue pay rise (the first official pay rise since their first award in 1914). Higgins, as part of the process, had required the union to submit a bond of £500 that it would forfeit if any of its branches took industrial action. The notice of this bond and an accompanying plea for industrial peace from Morris is noted without dissent in the minutes of the Sydney branch.⁶²

⁵⁸ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 7 June 1919, p.7.

⁵⁹ See Chapter Five, note 10.

⁶⁰ NSA, 7/5588.1, Police Special Bundles, Report of speech by 'Sergeant McCristal, a returned soldier' in the Domain, 12 January 1919, details the full quote (clearly indicating a certain eccentricity): 'He further stated that a lot of the men that were in the Returned Soldiers' Union were not soldiers; they were only the low diarrhoea class that got as far as Cairo, and deserted, lived under means not mentionable. He favoured Bolshevism and a Republic of Australia and the One Big Union. He told the people not to put any politician into Parliament that was a Free Mason.'

⁶¹ ANU, NBA, WWF Papers, Z248/Box 98, Minutes of Sydney Branch, WWF, 9 April 1919, records the approach made by the RSA. 7 May 1919 records McCristal's denial that he had said that 'the Returned Soldiers...were six bob a day murderers, scabs and mongrels.' The minutes continue to relate a messy and drawn out series of negotiations without a conclusion, marked by recriminations, mostly focussing on McCristal.

⁶² ANU, NBA, WWF Papers, Z248/Box 98, Minutes of Sydney Branch, WWF, 3 March 1919.

McCristal's radicalism clearly had limits, and confronting Joe Morris was beyond them.⁶³ Without an effective alliance with the returned soldiers, and with an official bar on industrial action, the scabs remained in Sydney.⁶⁴ It was not until 1924 that, as an indirect result of industrial action taken by the South Australian Labour Council and the Seamen's Union, preference was removed from the P&Cs on the deep-sea vessels in Sydney harbour, and all but eight members of the scab union were absorbed into the WWF.⁶⁵

The WWF COM had decreed against industrial action on the Sydney waterfront, and was aided by McCristal's alienation of the returned servicemen. In order to appease Justice Higgins, Sydney was quarantined from the virus of victory that had infected Fremantle and Melbourne. Even in Melbourne, the victory was not quite as total as it might have been. The wharfies' strike there was resolved soon after the end of the seamen's strike, when the Sydney Branch of the Seamen's Union returned on 26 August.⁶⁶ That same day, the Melbourne wharfies made their position clear, voting to accept the badge of the remaining loyalists as long as the Bureau was abolished.⁶⁷ Within a week, with Victoria desperate to end the coal famine, this compromise was accepted and the Melbourne Bureau was abolished.⁶⁸ There was,

⁶³ It is probably significant that McCristal was willing to defy the COM on another issue. ANU, NBA, WWF Papers, Z248/Box 98, Minutes of the Sydney Branch of the WWF, 28 August 1918, noted correspondence from Joe Morris 'stating that the Committee of Management had instructed him to ask all Branches to refrain from negotiations about the One Big Union scheme.' McCristal was happy to ignore this request. He was heavily involved in the OBU scheme and later served on the provisional executive of Willis's short-lived Industrial Socialist Labour Party. See Dixon, *Reformists and Revolutionaries*, p.33. Defiance of the COM on a political issue was easier than on an industrial question, which underlines that McCristal was more given to radical rhetoric than militancy.

⁶⁴ Despite the lack of industrial action on the Sydney waterfront in 1919, there is evidence that the general political radicalisation had had an impact on the wharfies, quite apart from McCristal's rhetoric. NSA, Police Department, Special Bundles, 7/5588.1, Police Report, 3 December 1918, records a lunchtime meeting held by ex-IWW prisoner Monty Miller and his daughter for the Industrial Labour Party (one of the attempts to revive the IWW under another name) which was attended by 'several hundred wharf labourers'. Also, ANU, NBA, WWF Papers, Z248/Box 98, Minutes of Sydney Branch, WWF, 25 June 1919, also records a visit by two delegates from the Fremantle branch of the union who related the story of their victory the previous month and 'urged that some steps similar to those adopted in Fremantle should be taken here to get the returned men to link up with the Federation.' The leaders of the Sydney Branch were, it appears, given every opportunity to learn from the lesson of Fremantle's victory. They seem to have been unable or unwilling to do so.

⁶⁵ Margo Beasley, *Wharfies: A history of the Waterside Workers' Federation of Australia*, Sydney: Halstead Press, 1996, p.64.

⁶⁶ *Age*, 26 August 1919, p.5.

⁶⁷ *Age* 27 August 1919, p.10.

⁶⁸ *Age*, 3 September 1919, p.10. Beasley, *Wharfies*, p.62, states that: 'In a small victory, Justice Higgins of the Arbitration Court announced in August 1919 that the Yarra Stevedoring Company's method of hiring labour would be abolished and that there would be a return to 1917 methods.' By disconnecting the victory (which in any case was surely not 'small') from the strike which led to it, she gives the false impression that it was an arbitrary act of benevolence on Higgins' part.

however, no compensation for the 170 scabs and they were forced to remain on the waterfront, albeit without preference. When the Melbourne wharfies moved to remove this remnant by industrial action in October, they incurred the wrath of Justice Higgins, who threatened to vary the new award to exclude Melbourne wharfies from the pay rise.⁶⁹ The action was abandoned and the handful of scabs remained, albeit without the Bureau, competing for work with the WWF members on an equal basis. On 13 October Justice Higgins delivered the sought-after new award for the wharfies; it provided an increase in the hourly rate from 1/9 to 2/3.⁷⁰ The extra sixpence per hour represented a 28.5 per cent increase that Higgins, incorrectly, considered to match the increase in the cost of living since 1914. The Piddington Royal Commission, which reported in 1920, established that the actual increase in the cost of living from 1914 to 1919 (averaging the figures for NSW and Victoria) was sixty-six per cent.⁷¹ The wharfies had, therefore, curtailed their successful campaign to drive the scabs from the ports, and abjured any notion of seeking a wage rise by direct action. They did this in order to secure an award which neither restored preference (although it had been restored unofficially everywhere except Sydney) nor offset, to any substantial degree, the dramatic decline in real wages they had suffered during the war.

Figure Three compares the percentage increase in the cost of living with the increases in wages won by the wharfies, the miners and the seamen. The first increase in the miners' wages, shown here as occurring in 1916, was granted in January of that year by Justice Higgins. The increase recorded in 1917 was made official in January 1917 (hence its appearance in that year on the graph) but was actually the settlement of the November 1916 coal strike. The second dramatic increase in coal miners' wages in 1919 was due to a threatened strike. This last increase indicates how rapidly the NSW coal miners had recovered their position after the defeat of 1917. The Victorian scabs at Richmond Main and Pelham Main, and the

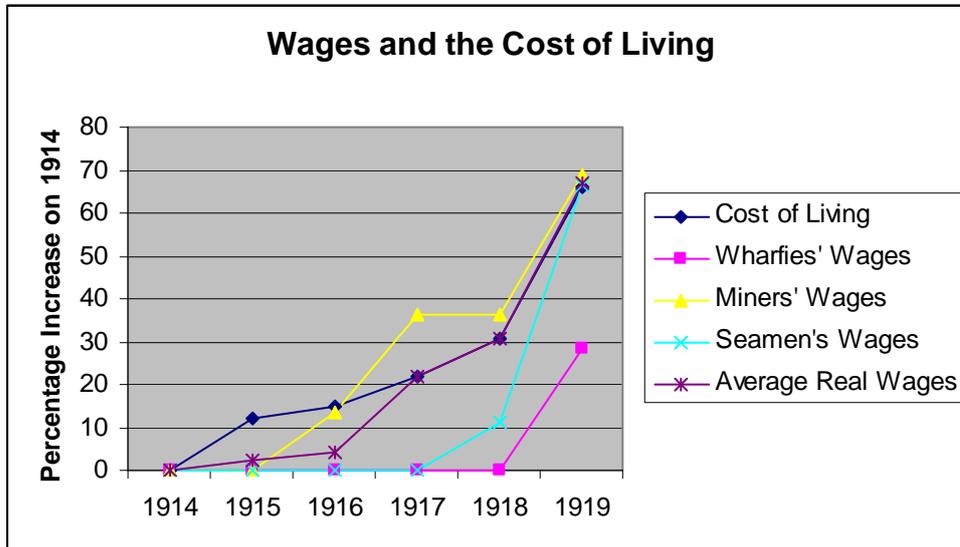
⁶⁹ *Age*, 21 September 1919, p.7.

⁷⁰ ANU, NBA, WWF Papers, Z248/Box 120, untitled document recording history of award increases for waterfront workers.

⁷¹ NLA, W.M. Hughes Papers, MS1538, Series 18, *Report of the Commission on the Basic Wage, Together With Evidence*, Melbourne: Federal Parliament, 1920, p.4, provides separate figures for the cost of living rises in each state, but no national figure. The figure of sixty six per cent is an average of the two figures for NSW and Victoria (which were close to each other in each of these years). See Chapter Two, Table 1 for the detailed figures for each state.

smaller numbers of NSW scabs in the other mines, had not lasted long after the return to work in October 1917

Figure Three⁷²



Childe famously summed up the fate of the Victorian scabs:

But in the end the free labourers from Victoria found themselves quite incapable of earning a decent wage on piece rate and, despite their revolvers and their police bodyguard, grew weary of living in constant terror from the unionists. So they elected to be repatriated, and most of the unionists drifted back to the pits.⁷³

The union records substantiate this. By 4 January 1918, the number of unemployed union members displaced by scabs had already been reduced from 730 to 230 and the Victorian scabs at Richmond Main had approached the union to request assistance in redressing grievances.⁷⁴ By the end of January, all the victimised men at Wallarah, which (as we saw in Chapter Four) had received the largest contingent of NSW scabs,

⁷² *Report of the Royal Commission into the Basic Wage*, provided the figures for the cost of living in this chart. ANU, NBA, ACSEF papers, E165/10/9, 'Position on the Northern Coalfield of New South Wales May 1929' (Northern Collieries Association), p.14, 'Daily Wage Rates', provided the figures for the coal miners. Fitzgerald & Cahill, *Seamen's Union of Australia*, pp.50-52, provided the figures for the seamen. ANU, NBA, WWF Papers, Z248/Box 120, untitled document recording history of award increases for waterfront workers provided the figures for the wharfies. Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics, *Year Book of the Commonwealth of Australia*, No.13, 1920, p.1069, provided the figures for the average real wage.

⁷³ Childe, *How Labour Governs*, p.160.

⁷⁴ ANU, NBA, ACSEF Papers, E165/2/1, Minutes of National Executive, ACSEF, 4 January 1918.

had all been re-employed.⁷⁵ By November 1918, even Pelaw and Richmond Main had been reclaimed for the union and Baddeley was holding talks with management, threatening action unless victimised militants were rehired.⁷⁶ The miners may have had an unwitting ally in their campaign to win back the mines – the owners. ‘Loyalists’ at the Lithgow Valley Mine sent a petition to the NSW Government complaining about their displacement in favour of strikers. The manager of the colliery had instructed them that they would have to work at the face at tonnage rates – an impossible choice for unskilled and unexperienced miners.⁷⁷ J. & A. Brown, the coal company that owned Richmond Main and Pelaw Main was later to complain, as part of an argument for compensation, that the Victorian Government had promised the ‘volunteers’ ‘that the standard rate of wages would be paid, irrespective of the amount of coal won’.⁷⁸ They clearly had little incentive to employ scabs who were causing them financial loss. By April 1919 coal stocks had been run down and the lack of shipping, even before the seamen’s strike, had made the situation outside of NSW particularly critical (this was also to be a key factor in securing victory for the seamen).⁷⁹ In this situation of coal famine the mere threat of industrial action was sufficient to win a wage rise, which was granted on 3 May 1919 by order of the Acting Prime Minister.⁸⁰

As Figure Three shows, the 1919 pay rise established a near perfect record by the coal miners in keeping ahead of wartime inflation. The seamen, by contrast, were late developers. They were granted an eleven per cent rise by Justice Higgins in December 1918, the inadequacy of which was a major factor in convincing them that

⁷⁵ Ibid, 24 January 1918.

⁷⁶ ANU, NBA, Northern Collieries Association Papers, E207/50, Letter from Manager of Minmi Colliery 26 June 1918, records that one victimised collier (from another mine) had obtained work at Richmond Main. Transcript of conference between Management of Pelaw Main and Baddeley, recorded Baddeley’s threat to isolate the mine – i.e. no members would apply for work until militants were re-employed. While no numbers are given, it is clear from the general tone of the transcript that the mine was now reliant on union labour.

⁷⁷ NSA, Premier’s Department, Inwards Correspondence, 9/4761, Memorandum to the Hon. W.G. Grahame MLA, 8 October 1917.

⁷⁸ VPRS, Premier’s Department, Inwards Correspondence, 1163/P/508, *Legislative Assembly of NSW, Papers Regarding the Claim of Messrs J. & A. Brown Against the Government of NSW*, 26 August 1919, p.11.

⁷⁹ VPRS, Premier’s Department Correspondence, 1177/P/14, Letter from the Victorian Premier to the Prime Minister, 9 April 1919, complained that the flu epidemic had restricted shipping and caused a coal shortage in Victoria.

⁸⁰ ANU, NBA, ACSEF papers, E165/10/9, ‘Position on the Northern Coalfield of New South Wales May 1929’ (Northern Collieries Association), p.14, ‘Daily Wage Rates’, gives the date of the order as 3 May 1919.

arbitration was a dead-end.⁸¹ It took the 1919 strike to recover what they had lost in wages since 1914. These examples show dramatically how inadequate arbitration was as a mechanism for maintaining real wages in an inflationary period. The seamen and the wharfies received no pay rise at all until after the war. Moreover the rises they did receive from Justice Higgins were well below the rate of inflation. The rise received by the miners in January 1916 was also below the rate of inflation, albeit by a small amount. The three dramatic rises were won by the coal strike of 1916, by the seamen's strike of 1919, and by the threat of a coal strike during the coal famine of 1919. Direct action may have been credited by Joe Kavanagh with 'knocking down' an edifice of unionism built up by arbitration.⁸² The seaman and the miners at least could be forgiven for not mourning that edifice's demise.

The legacy of 1917 varied from union to union. The miners of Broken Hill provided one extreme of the legacy. Their industrial action in 1919 had provided the other major contribution (along with the seamen) to the massive spike in strike days lost in 1919. They began, on 20 May 1919, a marathon strike that would last till November 1920. This strike was the culmination of the wartime radicalisation that had turned the Barrier, already a bastion of militancy, into a citadel of syndicalism. It was fought in difficult circumstances, over a series of demands encompassing hours and wages but primarily driven by concern over safety conditions. When it began, the stocks of concentrates built up during the war were still substantial,⁸³ and, by the time it ended, the economy had slipped into recession. Working in favour of the Barrier miners, however, was a new unity. In 1916 the underground miners had fought alone; in 1917 they were joined by the surface workers; in 1919, with wartime patriotism no longer a factor, the Port Pirie smelters struck too. The strike was kept going by financial support from the coal miners.⁸⁴ Its eventual success was helped also by the fact that the miners' leadership was equal to the task. Percy Brookfield in particular was both shrewd and intransigent in negotiation – a tribute to the difference made by

⁸¹ *Age*, 15 May 1919, p.7. They had submitted a claim for fifty per cent.

⁸² See Chapter Five, note 15.

⁸³ NLA, ORAL TRC 341, 'Interviews with five miners'. Interview with Shorty O'Neill (later the union 'boss' of the Barrier, who participated in the strike as a young man: 'they had it [concentrates] stacked everywhere from here to Port Pirie'. O'Neil's memory is confirmed by the company records. UMA, Broken Hill Associated Smelters (BHAS) Papers, Box 207, Report of W.L. Baillieu, Chairman of Directors, 14 June 1917: '...the Company owes it to these workers [the loyal workforce in the Port Pirie Smelter] to ensure that their means of livelihood is not imperilled by possible labour troubles with which they have no concern at Broken Hill. Heavy reserve stocks of concentrate are therefore being carried to Port Pirie.'

⁸⁴ *Ibid*, O'Neill states that they received £140,000 from the coal miners.

a leadership thrown up and tempered in mass struggles and backed by a solid core of politicised militants.⁸⁵ The full story of this epic struggle cannot be told here. It suffices to note the scale of the eventual victory, marked most dramatically by the historic precedent of a thirty five hour week, and that this victory, like the success of the seamen, was won by a group of workers that had shared in the defeat of 1917.

In contrast to Broken Hill, where the movement barely drew breath after suffering defeat in 1917, one group of workers for whom the defeat of 1917 was more permanent and substantial was the railwaymen. This is most dramatically shown by the collapse of unionism on the NSW railways. The ARTSA in particular was hard hit. Its official membership declined from 13,070 before the strike to 11,285 in December 1920. In reality the decline was more severe. The actual union membership was probably around three to four thousand in June 1918, and as low as two thousand in December 1919.⁸⁶ The LEDFCA's membership decline was less steep, reflecting its greater inherent industrial power due to the skills base of its members. Its membership fell from 3,341 to 2,615 in December 1920. However, even in this case, there was a severe crisis in 1918 when (as of November) eighty per cent of the members were unfinancial.⁸⁷ It was of some consolation that the 'loyalist' unions never gained more than a foothold in the service, despite the large numbers of railway workers who had scabbed in 1917. These unions covered only 10.5 per cent of the railway workforce, declining to 8.2 per cent by 1929.⁸⁸ The alternative to genuine unionism was demoralised apathy rather than outright sympathy with management.⁸⁹

As well as widespread victimisation, returned strikers were punished in a number of ways. The career path available to members of the LEDFCA was manipulated by management to reward 'loyalists' with promotion and punish strikers with demotion, though in many cases this was to prove only temporary. Nevertheless, it was particularly galling for former drivers to serve as firemen with drivers who had

⁸⁵ *Silver, Sin and Sixpenny Ale*, pp.171-4, gives a good account of the role of Brookfield in the strike.

⁸⁶ Patmore, *A history of industrial relations in the N.S.W. government railways*, p.367.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.* There were still sixty-nine per cent unfinancial as of December 1919.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.402-3.

⁸⁹ It would be wrong to assume that the main motive for staying at work during the strike was sympathy with management rather than fear or financial concerns. A young dairy farmer who volunteered as a scab during the strike recalled: 'There were some railway workers who didn't go on strike but they were still in sympathy with the unions who were on strike and they didn't make it any easier for us...' (NLA, Oral TRC 2301, NSW Bicentennial oral history collection, Int. 139, Interview with Foreman Crawford.)

been promoted into the position for scabbing.⁹⁰ This policy of victimisation was even extended to returned servicemen who were routinely asked if they would have struck in 1917 and then either sacked or demoted if they answered wrongly.⁹¹ The bitterness engendered by these divisions helped, however, to maintain some cohesion amongst those unionists on the railways and the tramways who had held out. These called themselves ‘lilywhites’, and celebrated their loyalty each year throughout the 1920s and into the 1930s.⁹² A young man who joined the tramways in Sydney in the early 1920s recalled that it was difficult to get a job there because the 1917 strike ‘had consolidated the men’, and added that ‘they [the lilywhites] built our union up into what it is today’.⁹³ This was, however, a recollection made in the 1980s. The task of rebuilding of the union would extend into the 1930s and beyond.

The immediate aftermath of the strike led to a consolidation of control behind the moderate officials in the LEDFCA, as the union returned to a commitment to arbitration, pursuing a federal award to replace the state award made null by the union’s deregistration.⁹⁴ They were aided in this by the fact that the Railway Commissioners, despite the vindictiveness with which they inflicted punishment on individual strikers, were sufficiently concerned by the prospect of a repeat of the 1917 strike to follow a more paternalistic policy towards their employees during the 1920s.⁹⁵ Commissioner Fraser, ever avid for American ideas, adopted a new policy of ‘welfarism’. This was connected to the idea of promoting a ‘career service’. These policies led to an increase in the deficit on the railways, as, despite increased competition from motor vehicles and a consequent decline in revenue, the

⁹⁰ Ben Chifley is traditionally supposed to have been ‘sacked’ from his position as a train driver after the strike. David Day, *Chifley*, Sydney: HarperCollins, 2001, pp147-152, reveals that he was only demoted. He was reinstated as a driver as early as 4 October 1917, and while losing his seniority rights, was back on his pre-strike pay-rate by 16 November 1917. He was demoted twice more, for three weeks in September 1918, and from December 1918 to May 1919. By July 1919 he was secure in his position and earning more than he had before the strike.

⁹¹ Mitchell Library, Z MLOH 2, Richard Roxworthy, ‘Interviews with retired bus and tram workers’, interview with Bill White, 1982. White recalled one tramway worker who, on returning from the front, was offered a promotion if he publicly stated that he would not have struck. He refused.

⁹² Ibid, ‘Jack Lang attended the annual function of the Lilywhites and the Engine drivers would come from Moree to Bombala to attend’.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ This move in turn gave greater power and influence to the federal officials, particularly the extremely conservative Federal Secretary, George Crossman (see above, Chapter Five, note 6). The award wasn’t achieved, however, till 1925, when one of Crossman’s allies, the young Ben Chifley, was a star performer in presenting evidence to the commission. See Patmore, *A history of industrial relations*, pp.433-5.

⁹⁵ Ibid, p.390, ‘...despite their victory, management were determined that such a strike should never occur again and devoted considerable resources towards worker loyalty.’

Commissioners were reluctant to lose workers by retrenchment.⁹⁶ The victory of the Railway Commissioners was, in other words, a Pyrrhic victory, won at the cost of deepening the deficit they had hoped to reverse. This was not apparent, however, to the railway workers who had no obvious reason to associate the newfound benevolence of their management with what still seemed, in retrospect, a disastrous defeat.

For the ARTSA, there was an added bitterness to the aftermath of the strike, as the officials tore themselves apart in a particularly messy faction fight, made bitter by recriminations that appear to have had no substantial underlying political motive. A cabal of officials called a general meeting and moved to sack the secretary Claude Thompson, accusing him of unspecified financial irregularities.⁹⁷ Thompson refused to accept the sacking and had the offending officials sacked in turn. He then drafted A.W. Buckley MLA as a sort of ‘celebrity’ president to consolidate his counter-coup. Buckley may have been an ex-wobbly with a talent for getting himself arrested, but his election as a Labor MP indicated that his general political trajectory was rightwards.⁹⁸ He was still enough of a left-winger in 1919 to ensure that the ARTSA affiliated to the Labor Council and participated in the political manoeuvrings around the OBU (though not actually splitting from the ALP when Willis set up his short-lived Industrial Labor Party). Yet, all this was window-dressing. Industrially the ARTSA was devastated. Its participation in the strike had been uneven; the militancy of some of its metropolitan sections had been more than matched by the conservatism of country branches that refused to strike. The legacy was a workforce where unionism was beleaguered and demoralised.

In general, the railways were a sector where unionism was in no shape to recover from the strike. Even the craft unions in the workshops suffered – the ASE, for instance, suffered severely from victimisation. All but one of the ASE branch secretaries and shop stewards involved in the strike were victimised.⁹⁹ Figure 2 (above) shows the dramatic consequence of this industrial decimation: the failure of

⁹⁶ Ibid, p.391-4.

⁹⁷ ANU, NBA, Australian Railways Union Papers, P103/1, Minutes of ARTSA Executive, 28 December 1917 to 27 April 1918.

⁹⁸ Buckley was arrested on charges of conspiracy and sedition on 25 August 1917, largely based on speeches in the Domain. See the *Sun*, 25 August 1917, p.5. As the new president of the ARTSA, he was not, however, about to adopt a policy of industrial militancy. Patmore, *A history of industrial relations*, p.440, notes that in 1923 Buckley ‘reminded union members at Werris Creek that they were “shockingly defeated” in 1917 and that strikes “demoralised” workers and gained nothing for them.’

⁹⁹ Buckley, *The Amalgamated Engineers in Australia*, p.271.

the rail and tramway sector to contribute anything of significance to the strike wave in 1919. If the solidarity was ‘misapplied’ in the Great Strike, as Childe claimed, then it is ironic that the one sector where unionism suffered an undifferentiated defeat was the sector where the 1917 strike began, not the industries where workers struck in solidarity.

Table 1¹⁰⁰

Year	Strikers	Involved in Losing strikes	Involved in Successful strikes	In Strikes settled by Compromise*
1916	170,683	36,670	70,588	63,425
1917	173,970	119,589	24,331	30,050
1918	56,439	15,998	13,780	26,661
1919	157,591	43,140	54,810	59,641
1920	155,566	61,947	30,399	63,220

* Includes strikes settled ‘by compromise’ and strikes which had not been settled by the year’s end.

The domination of the strike figures in 1919 by the seamen’s strike and the dispute at Broken Hill distorts to some extent the true picture of the labour movement in that year. Table 1 provides some necessary qualification of the picture painted by the explosion in strike days lost. It reveals that in 1919 there were 157,591 workers involved in strike action. This was fewer than the 173,970 involved in 1917, but whereas 119,589 of those strikers in 1917 were involved in losing strikes, in 1919 only 43,140 strikers were involved in unsuccessful strikes. Nevertheless, the figures for 1916 are probably a better comparison. Despite only 1,678,930 strike days being lost in 1916, these strikes involved *more* workers than in 1919 (170,683) and only 36,670 were involved in losing strikes. It would appear, then, that the recovery in 1919 was not quite to the same heights as the movement had reached in 1916. It involved slightly fewer workers in strikes that were, on average, somewhat less likely to be successful. The strike movement continued into 1920 when an impressive 155,566 workers were again involved in strikes that cost 1,872,065 days lost. Unfortunately, 61,947 of these strikers were involved in losing strikes, reflecting the more difficult

¹⁰⁰ Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics, *Year Book of the Commonwealth of Australia*, No.14, Melbourne, 1921, p.1019.

economic situation. Unemployment rose from 5.2 per cent in 1919 to 7.8 per cent in 1920, and full-blown recession hit in 1921 as the rate climbed to over 11 per cent.¹⁰¹

Despite this qualification, it remains that there was a significant revival by the labour movement in 1919, which continued into 1920. Nor, despite the domination of the strike figures by the titanic struggles in Broken Hill and in the shipping sector, was the recovery confined to those two areas. Buckley, for instance, writes of the engineers that, whereas the ASE remained weakened in the railway sector and in the steelworks at Newcastle (where the management of BHP took a particularly hard line against unionism in the wake of the Great Strike),

[an] important difference between 1890 and 1917 was that the defeat of the unions in the latter year was not followed by an economic depression. Certainly, many of the unions were severely affected... Yet the defeat of the 1917 strike was not catastrophic. The ASE in particular displayed an extraordinary resilience, being more militant in the few years from 1918 than it had ever been before.¹⁰²

The Federated Ironworkers' Association (FIA), though also suffering victimisation on the railways and at the steelworks in BHP, also took part in the revival of the movement. Significantly, its Sydney branch shifted to the left dramatically, coming under the leadership of H.L. Denford, an associate of Jock Garden who would serve briefly as the general secretary of the Communist Party in the early 1920s.¹⁰³ Denford was thus one of the few leaders of an industrial union to be associated with the Trades Hall Reds. In 1919, the union held a referendum of its members on whether to join the proposed OBU; the biggest majority in favour was recorded by the Sydney branch.¹⁰⁴ Sandra Cockfield has focussed on the workers at Mort's Dock, who, as noted above in Chapter Three, struck in 1917. She asserted that the rank and file of the FIA at Mort's were dissatisfied with aspects of the 1915 award and frustrated with the failure of their officials to remedy their grievances. These grievances, however,

¹⁰¹ Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics, *Year Book of the Commonwealth of Australia*, No.15, Melbourne, 1922, p.871.

Buckley, *The Amalgamated Engineers in Australia*, p.273. See also, T. Sheridan, *Mindful Militants: The Amalgamated Engineering Union in Australia 1920-1972*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975, p.63, 'The AEU [the union changed its name to the Amalgamated Engineering Union around this time] had been involved [in 1919-20] in wage campaigns and disputes in all districts and the result had forced employers to make over award payments proportionately higher than any gained until World War Two.'

¹⁰³ Robert Murray & Kate White, *The Ironworkers: A History of the Federated Ironworkers' Association of Australia*, Sydney, Hale & Iremonger, 1982, p.28 & p.52.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid*, pp.28-9.

were remedied by industrial action taken in 1919, led by the ASE but involving FIA members as well. The management at Mort's played a leading role in the Iron Trades Employers' Association (ITEA). Cockfield also noted that the 'ITEA strategy centred on forcing unions to the Arbitration Court, correctly surmising that the Court would restrain wage increases.'¹⁰⁵ This strategy could, however, no longer be pursued for the simple reason that most of the unions were deregistered:

The erosion of real wages during the War and the actions of the Court in the aftermath of the 1917 General Strike when it deregistered numerous unions had alienated the union movement and prompted several unions to question past tactics that had relied heavily on arbitration. Also, with the ASE deregistered at the time, it had little alternative to direct action.¹⁰⁶

In this context, taking into account the industrial offensive undertaken by the ASE, the granting of the federal award to the engineers in 1920 – an event of central importance to Hearn and Knowles, as noted earlier in this chapter (see above, note 4) – is better understood as an attempt to reign in a militant onslaught. In short, it represented a recognition of victory rather than the victory itself. This sort of consideration helps to explain why Justice Higgins of the Federal Court was so reluctant to follow the course adopted by his counterparts on the NSW bench and deregister unions such as the WWF. It also puts into perspective the behaviour of the NSW minister, G.S. Beeby, during 1919. Beeby was, like the Premier Holman, an apostate – a former socialist who had found himself serving in a conservative ministry as Minister for Labour and Industry.¹⁰⁷ He had left his youthful radicalism far behind and by 1919 was fulminating against strikes: 'The strike is rapidly becoming political instead of industrial. Syndicalism is eating its way into the vitals of trade unionism.'¹⁰⁸ Beeby had been transformed into a warrior who fought for the employing class with all the fanaticism of a convert, yet possibly because of his experience on the other side of the fence, he understood the usefulness of arbitration

¹⁰⁵ Sandra Cockfield, 'Arbitration, business strategy and labour management at Mort's Dock', Greg Patmore, John Shields & Nikola Balnave (eds) *The Past is Before Us: Proceedings of the Ninth National Labour History Conference, 30 June -2 July 2005*, p.75.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ According to H.V. Evatt, *Australian Labour Leader: The story of W.A. Holman and the Labour Movement*, Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1954, p.33, Beeby had been an ally of the young Holman in promoting Marxist economics against the landtaxers; Ibid, pp.235-6, Beeby was unusual in having abandoned the ALP well before the conscription struggle – in 1913.

¹⁰⁸ Dixon, *Reformists and Revolutionaries*, p.114; Turner, *Industrial Labour & Politics*, p.145, even records that Beeby, as Minister for Labour, was determined for a showdown with the unions over the card system when Fuller was initially prepared to compromise.

to the employers. According to Patmore, Beeby opposed the Commissioners' policy of encouraging company unions on the railways because he

feared that if a large number of railway workers did not have their grievances satisfactorily represented before the Court, then there would be further industrial strife in the deficit plagued NSW Railways.¹⁰⁹

This echoes the concerns of the Railway Commissioners noted above. In March 1918, Beeby attempted to legislate to provide himself with the power to re-register unions. The bill was amended by the ultra-conservative Legislative Council to require the consent of an arbitration judge, and when Beeby attempted to re-register fourteen unions in May 1918, Judge Heydon ruled against him.¹¹⁰ Re-registration of the unions had to wait till December 1920 under the auspices of the Storey Labour Government.¹¹¹

Beeby was right to be concerned. Unemployment in 1919, despite the influx of returned soldiers, remained too low to deter industrial action. The mixture of low unemployment and high inflation is a recipe for a strike wave. The reverse was to apply in the early 1920s when prices actually fell slightly and a recession hit – which helps explain why strike figures plummeted after 1920.¹¹² Although he failed, Beeby's attempt to re-register the unions (which at least passed the conservative dominated Legislative Assembly) indicates that some on the conservative side of politics were aware of the usefulness of arbitration. In 1928 the Bruce/Page Nationalist government in Canberra fell in a landslide after an attempt to interfere with the institution of arbitration. The election of Labor governments in such circumstances, while often portrayed as simply the will of the people, may also

¹⁰⁹ Patmore, *A history of industrial relations*, p.362.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp.363-3.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.413. An attempt to restore the jobs of victimised railway workers was blocked that same year in the Legislative Council. *Ibid.*, p.411, states that, as late as 1925, Lang was threatening Commissioner Fraser with the sack if he failed to reinstate 500 still out of work.

¹¹² ANU, NBA, WWF Papers, Z248/Box 120, contains an untitled document listing significant historical events regarding waterfront wages. It notes that in 1922 Judge Powers finally granted an automatic quarterly cost-of-living adjustment of the pay rates of wharfies. This would have come in handy during the inflationary period of the war. Instead, the second adjustment awarded – in May 1923 – actually *decreased* the hourly rate by a halfpenny. The one exception to the industrial quiescence of the 1920s was the coal miners, who remained locked in a titanic struggle, with the offensive alternating between them and their employers. See, Edgar Ross, *A History of the Miners' Federation of Australia*, Sydney: Miners' Federation, 1970, pp.313-31. ANU, NBA, ACSEF Papers, E165/10/9 'Position on the Northern Coalfields of New South Wales May 1929', Northern Collieries Association, p. 14, relates that strike days lost in the NSW coal industry was in the hundreds of thousands per year throughout the 1920s, and even reached 1,134,640 in 1926 – a higher figure than in 1917. The coalfields were, however, very much the exception during the industrial quiet of the 1920s.

indicate that a section of the conservative establishment is not entirely displeased with the defeat of their own party. It is indeed significant that, even in the depths of the Depression when the membership and industrial power of unions collapsed, there was no move to end the arbitration system. The experience of 1919, when so many unions – cut free from the arbitration system by choice or otherwise – took advantage of favourable economic circumstances to win major gains by direct action, cast a long shadow.

Being cut free from arbitration was a gain in 1919 because the labour movement was still shaped by the radicalisation of the war years. It would be a mistake to assume that the removal of this constraint on militancy would, in and of itself, have been a sufficient explanation for the strike wave of that year. It helped, as we have seen, that unemployment was low, and inflation added the essential motivation for much of the strike activity. Strikes, however, require leadership, and the existence of a layer of politicised militants, so evident in the events of 1917, was clearly important. In this regard the importance of the impact of the Bolshevik Revolution is something that invites speculation. The difficulty for the historian is that the evidence of how that great event influenced rank and file workers is difficult to obtain. The anti-Bolshevik hysteria of the right is easy to establish, as is the attraction of communism to significant layers of existing left-wing activists. Unfortunately, the failure to actually found a Communist Party until 1920, when the movement was beginning to move from the offensive into retreat, deprives us of an effective test of the enthusiasm for the Revolution beyond the ranks of the far left. The failure of the Communist Party to build itself throughout the 1920s appears, in retrospect, to confirm that revolutionary politics was alien to the Australian working class. What might have been built if a party existed in 1919 will never be known.

Whatever the impact of events in Russia, the extent and radical nature of the strike wave in 1919 remains evident. It is clear, moreover, that the defeat of 1917 was not the catastrophe it has often been painted to be. As we have seen, for some groups of workers, most dramatically for the railway workers of NSW, the damage sustained to their union organisation would take decades to recover. For others, however, such as the coal miners and the metal miners of Broken Hill, their traditions of militancy were such that they recovered quickly, purged their ranks of scabs, and were ready to resume the offensive after twelve months. For some, such as the seamen, and even (though to a lesser extent) the wharfies, the strike was a key moment in establishing

new traditions of militancy. Moreover, the experience of 1919 provided a salutary lesson for the more astute members of the employing class and their political representatives, that abandoning arbitration for naked class conflict could be a dangerous course. They might gain a short-term advantage, but they would also leave behind a reservoir of bitterness and a labour movement with a thirst for revenge. They might indeed find their cities plunged into darkness.

Conclusion

The aims of this thesis are set out at the end of Chapter One. The first aim is to ‘contribute empirically and theoretically to the “rank and filist” debate’. The essence of that theoretical contribution is also outlined in Chapter One. It suggests that the explicatory value of the Great Strike is that it was that most rare of historical events: a class conflict of sufficient depth and scale to raise the question of class rule. Turner alluded to this when he argued that the situation in NSW did not ‘meet the Leninist criteria for a general strike’. What he meant by this somewhat mechanical invocation of Lenin was that a general strike, by raising the issue of class rule, invites a repressive response from the state of sufficient viciousness and intensity that it can only succeed in a situation where revolution is on the agenda.

The problem with such schema is that, as Luxemburg made clear in *The Mass Strike*, there is more to the development of the working class than the patient accumulation of forces, which can be harboured until circumstances are ready for them to be successfully unleashed. The ability to fight is best developed in conflict. For the working class to develop its full potential it needed more than organisation and careful preparation; it needed to be tempered in battle. In all likelihood some battles would lead to defeat, and in some circumstances defeat was truly disastrous. In any case, it is by no means clear that defeat was inevitable in 1917. In order to determine whether or not it was, there are several imperatives that need to be assessed. There are the various ‘objective’ factors that prevailed: the reserves of coal available to the government; the economic situation, particularly the level of unemployment; the extent of organisation in the different battalions of the movement; and the historical traditions of different groups of workers. Yet the more one attempts to enumerate the ‘objective’ influences, the more they shade into factors that are clearly ‘subjective’ and thus open to the influence of human agency. Why, for instance, did the historical conservatism of the railway workers become an impediment to the movement while the conservatism of the Seamen’s Union was so easily brushed aside?

Even more significant is the question of the movement’s official leadership. When arguing that the movement was not ready to wage a mass strike on this scale, the failure of the movement’s leadership is one of the more obvious points to emphasise. At one level this failure appears inevitable – an ‘objective’ factor. It was

the product of an extensive industrial and political history. The bureaucracy that had developed within the Australian labour movement was a product of decades – it is hard to imagine it being suddenly transformed or supplanted. Yet the failure of leadership was a failure of human agency. Decisions were made by men who could have behaved otherwise. To explain why they chose not to fight, or to fight reluctantly, to restrain rather than to agitate, and, as they eventually did, to capitulate so shamefully, is not to justify or condemn their behaviour. The ‘inevitable’ defeat of 1917 was an inevitability only if one includes in any assessment the ‘subjective’ factors of leadership alongside the ‘objective’ factors. To do so, however, is to abandon any concept of contingency; it becomes an exercise in teleology.

Examination of the ‘subjective’ element in the Great Strike reveals a startling contradiction between the rank and file and leadership of the labour movement. The existence of this contradiction – and its stark exposure in the context of this great conflict – is a powerful argument in favour of those scholars who have argued that a distinction between the official leadership and the rank and file of the labour movement is an essential tool for labour historians. In short, it validates the ‘rank and filists’ in the face of their critics. That contradiction reached its apex in the aftermath of the decision of 9 September 1917 to end the strike on the railways – to capitulate. At other moments the tension between the rank and file and the officials was muted, evidenced for the most part by differences in utterances and actions rather than in direct confrontation. Chapter Three to some extent, and Chapter Four more dramatically, reveal these differences; Chapter Five attempts to explain them. It does so by examining the conduct of the trade union officials in the Great Strike, placing it within the context of the development of trade unionism in Australia prior to 1917. This has been the subject of a debate that has centred around arbitration which has been largely between a view that the labour movement was built around arbitration and entirely dependent upon it (the Dependency Hypothesis) and an alternative argument that the movement was built without reliance on arbitration and continued to be characterised in its day-to-day existence by traditional forms of organising.

In place of this dichotomy, Chapter Five outlines a view of arbitration as a *response* to a growing movement and a response which had far greater impact upon the officials within the movement (in particular the federal officials) than upon the rank and file. Only with an analysis that views the labour movement with an understanding of the distinction between the officials and the rank and file can we

make sense of the role of arbitration as both a victory and a method of incorporation, as both a spur to organisation and a constraint on direct action. Only such an analysis can explain how arbitration might have a greater influence on the officials than on the rank and file, becoming a source of conflict within the movement – sometimes having a constraining influence on militancy and sometimes being brushed aside.

The value of the Great Strike as an historical example is precisely the fact that it was not a normal event. These were abnormal times, and in abnormal times hidden aspects are sometimes revealed. One such hidden aspect was that trade union officials who were on paper more ‘left wing’, or at least more *au fait* with the socialist literature than the members they represented, were far less willing to confront the capitalist state than the untutored militants of the rank and file.

Redirecting responsibility for the strike’s defeat away from the archetype of an unthinking rank and file and focussing instead on the inadequacies of the strike’s official leadership thus begins the task of reassessing the Great Strike. As outlined in Chapter One, the next major aim of the thesis was to test a hypothesis that ‘the traditional historiography of the strike is incorrect in its dismissal of the strike, its belittling of the positive elements involved in a rank and file revolt on such a scale, and in its failure to address the medium term consequences of the strike, particularly its connection with the strike wave of 1919’. Chapters Six and Seven complete the task of testing this hypothesis.

Chapter Six brings new evidence to bear on the assumption, unchallenged since Childe stated it with such bluntness in 1924, that there was ‘too much coal at grass’ for the strike to succeed. It demonstrates that the ample reserves held in NSW were not sufficient to prevent a coal famine in the other states – most particularly in Victoria. In the end Victoria went very close to running out of coal. That the reserves lasted so long was due to the failure of the leaders of the coal miners to adopt aggressive tactics. In particular, the failure to call out the Wonthaggi mine when the NSW mines struck, and the decision to return to work there before the strike was settled in NSW, gave the Victorian Railways extra breathing space.

Chapter Six also speculates on the possibility that more aggressive tactics, particularly mass picketing, could have overcome the strategic problem of scabbing. It uses counter examples, from Broken Hill and from Fremantle in 1919, in order to give this speculation some substance. Speculation it remains, however, and speculation cannot resolve any question definitively. Nevertheless, it can be stated

with confidence that the idea that the strike was doomed to defeat cannot likewise be proved. All that can be said is that there were alternatives to respectful and non-confrontational protest, and that these alternatives were never explored. Arguably, this is sufficient to support the hypothesis.

Chapter Seven explores the links between the Great Strike of 1917 and the strike wave of 1919. It establishes a connection but suggests that that connection is a complex one, involving a different set of reactions to the defeat of the Great Strike amongst different groups of workers. Amongst those who may be termed the 'vanguard', in particular the coal miners of NSW and the metal miners of Broken Hill, the experience of the Great Strike worked upon an existing tradition of militancy. It was one more episode, albeit an important one, within a series of struggles that tempered the continual growth of militancy and political consciousness. Amongst some groups of workers, most dramatically the seamen, but also the wharfies in Melbourne and the ironworkers in Sydney, the defeat of 1917 was a decisive moment in the development of a new militancy. The experience of the strike was a spur to a leftward shift which helped ensure that, within twelve months, they were ready for fresh battles, and those fresh battles were to be fought with a militancy that would have been unthinkable without the experience of 1917. For a third group of workers, most dramatically for the railway workers of NSW, the defeat in 1917 was a backward step from which recovery would take decades.

Not all the workers who took part in the great strike wave of 1919 had participated in the Great Strike. There were clearly other factors, such as the inflationary surge of that year and (though this is harder to establish) the impact of the Russian Revolution that can contribute to an explanation of the movement's resurgence. Yet it remains a fact that the vast bulk of strike days lost in 1919 were lost by action taken by workers who had shared in the defeat of 1917. This alone serves to act as an antidote to the traditional assessments of the strike as a disaster and, in the words of Childe, that 'the solidarity was misapplied'.

Solidarity was not misapplied. The Great Strike was defeated by many things. Coal stocks were high – high enough to make victory difficult but not impossible. The Government at both state and federal levels was determined and prepared for a showdown. Wartime patriotism divided the movement and helped to mobilise large sections of the middle class and rural population, feeding the 'volunteer' movement and flooding the wharves, in particular, with scabs. Mostly, however, it was a failure

of politics and leadership that led the movement to defeat. The government was prepared for class warfare; the leadership of the labour movement was prepared for appearances at the Arbitration Court, for speeches in the Domain, for respectable protest, but not for battle. It was a leadership that had shrunk from the prospect of striking, and, once a strike had been forced upon it, had no notion of how to win.

The re-building of the trade unions after the defeat and depression of the 1890s had been, for the most part, a gradual process. The patient grind experienced by the likes of the young John Curtin, of low-level agitation and propaganda, of dealing with petty grievances and compensation cases, of appealing to courts and wages boards, of slowly building a stronger union machine through recruitment and amalgamation – all this was no preparation for the cataclysm of a World War and the crisis it engendered. The rank and file was not prepared either. It may, in some cases, have suspected that its leaders were not capable of leading it to victory, but it knew of no alternative but to place the dispute in their hands and hope for the best. There was to be no antipodean equivalent of the Clyde Workers' Council with its famous statement: 'We will support the officials just so long as they represent the workers, but we will act independently immediately they misrepresent them'.¹

The rank and file was not capable of transferring control of the dispute into its own hands. There is no evidence that it had any conception either of the more aggressive tactics that may have won, of rapid extension of the strike, or of mass pickets. It generally accepted the arguments made by the officials of the value and force of public opinion, and of the need for respectable and dignified protest. Nevertheless the rank and file showed itself again and again to be far to the left of the officials, even where those officials may have possessed the most impeccable socialist credentials. It was the energy and enthusiasm of rank and file workers, especially of the younger generation, that made this strike notable. They began the strike and forced its rapid spread through the major legions of the organised working class, they railed against its betrayal, and some of them took the first opportunity to obtain revenge when conditions favoured the movement once again in 1919.

The criticism of the 'rank-and-filist' paradigm by Zeitlin and others cannot account for these events. The Great Strike of 1917 in Australia, like the British

¹ Mike Byers, Clyde Workers' Committee (CWC), 2002, in: Glasgow Digital Library, *Red Clydeside: a history of the labour movement in Glasgow 1910-1932: A gateway to images and information resources on the history of Red Clydeside and the Scottish Labour movement of the early 20th century*, <http://gdl.cdli.strath.ac.uk/redclyde/redclygrobyecwc.htm>, accessed 17 November 2006.

General Strike in 1926, which served as an archetype to many of the ‘rank-and-filist’ scholars of the British movement, poses too sharp a contradiction between the two levels of the movement to be dismissed as accidental. Both events reveal a contrast between the enthusiasm and energy – one might even suggest the insurrectionary spirit of the rank and file – and the timidity of the trade union officials. This timidity and conservatism, displayed across the political spectrum of officials, can only be understood as an inherent characteristic of the trade union bureaucracy. It cannot be explained away as simply a function of their politics, or of some essential Anglo-Saxon tradition of pragmatic conservatism. (Such a characteristic, if it existed, would surely have been equally as evident in the rank and file.) Both events were unusual and, in a sense, unrepresentative; such cataclysmic confrontations between the classes are not common occurrences, especially in relatively prosperous, stable countries such as Australia and Britain. Nevertheless, they both took place; and the historian must study what actually happened, rather than partake in the social scientist’s approximation of what normally occurs in a normal period.

Yet the study of such an event reveals different answers to different questions according to the focus and methodology of the historian. For a labour historian with an overwhelmingly institutional focus, the strike and its immediate consequences will almost inevitably appear as an unmitigated disaster. From the point of view of unions, as institutions, a strike, and especially a mass strike, is far too dangerous an undertaking to contemplate with anything but fear. It is a high stakes gambit, risking the patiently built union machine for what, from the point of view of the union as an institution, are normally matters of only secondary importance. From the perspective of the workers whom the union represents, the existence of a union as an institution is, in contrast, of secondary importance to what that union is able to achieve for the worker. If conditions and wages are to be sacrificed for the machine, then the machine is of no value at all.

In any case, the traditional view of the Great Strike as a disaster is, as we have seen, not an accurate picture of what the strike and its defeat meant for the labour movement. Defeat can be demoralising and destructive, but it can also be a catalyst for change, for regroupment and resurgence. The contrasting fortunes of the unions that shared in the defeat in 1917 reveal the value of a fighting tradition – of a culture of militancy. The coal miners, and the metal miners at Broken Hill, entered the strike with such traditions already entrenched. Other unions, most notably the seamen, and

to a lesser extent, the wharfies, built new traditions or strengthened old ones significantly during the strike. The railway unions went into the strike industrially weak, fought half-heartedly and lost dramatically. They were the slowest to recover and did not share in the resurgence of 1919. Those who were militant before, or became militant during the strike, like the seamen, recovered rapidly and were able to return to the offensive, strengthened rather than weakened by the experience.

The Great Strike is, then, more usefully understood in the context of the wartime crisis that engendered it and of the post-war strike wave that almost immediately followed it. Its defeat was not a final defeat, but a sharp lesson to a movement that remained, in general, on an upward trajectory.

That trajectory was to be checked more dramatically by the recession of the early 1920s, and by the accompanying end of the inflationary crisis that had helped fuel so many of the strikes mentioned in this thesis. The generation of young workers who flooded the streets and took mass meetings by storm in 1917 and 1919 would live on to experience the Depression, the growth of Communist Party, the rebuilding of the movement from the mid-1930s and into wartime and the securing of more substantial and permanent victories. Those victories and the traditions embodied in them were not built overnight. The lessons of 1917 undoubtedly played a role in laying some of the groundwork for what was to come. However one views the immediate consequences of 1917 – and in 1919, at least, the positive nature of those consequences seems clear – a broader view of how the labour movement is built demands a conclusion that they did not strike in vain. In short, the solidarity was not misapplied.

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All Grades Advocate

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Brisbane Courier Mail

Cumberland Times

Daily Telegraph

Illawarra Mercury

International Socialist

Labor Call

Newcastle Herald and Miners Advocate

Northern Star

Sydney Mail

Sydney Morning Herald

Sun (Sydney)

The Railway & Tramway Record

The Socialist

West Australian

Westralian Worker

Woman Voter

Worker

Annotated Glossary

Trade Unions involved in the Great Strike

(What follows is not an exhaustive list of the unions involved in the strike – merely a glossary of all those mentioned in the text of this thesis).

<u>Acronym</u>	<u>Full Title</u>	<u>Workers Covered</u>
ACSEF	Australian Coal and Shale Employees Federation	Coal miners & underground miners at Broken Hill (See AMA).
AMA	Amalgamated Miners' Association	Underground miners at Broken Hill (affiliated to ACSEF in 1917, but still mainly autonomous).
ARTSA	Amalgamated Rail and Transport Service Association	'Industrial' union for the NSW railways. It also had some members in the tramways. Organised most railway staff, but not drivers, firemen and cleaners.
ASCJ	Amalgamated Society of Carpenters & Joiners	Carpenters
ASE	Amalgamated Society of Engineers	Skilled metalworkers – Particularly fitters and turners.
	Artificial Manure Workers' Union	Employees of superphosphate companies in Melbourne.
	Australasian Society of Engineers (sometimes also referred to as 'Australian Engineers')	Small rival to ASE.
	Blacksmiths' Union	Blacksmiths
	Boilermakers' Union	Boilermakers
	Carters' Union	Shorthand term, often Used for Trolley & Draymen's Union.

	Coal Lumpers Union	Workers in Sydney who loaded coal onto ships.
	Coachmakers' Union	Workers employed in railway workshops – mainly constructing carriages.
COM (or COM WWF)	Committee of Management Waterside Worker's Federation	Federal Executive of the WWF.
ETU	Electrical Trades Union	Electricians and workers in power plants.
FEDFA	Federated Engine Drivers' & Firemen's Association	Boiler attendants and operators of steam driven Equipment (eg. cranes lifts etc.)
FIA	Federated Ironworkers Association	Semi-skilled metal Workers – especially trades assistants. It also covered workers in the new BHP steelworks in Newcastle.
	Fremantle Lumpers Union	Wharfies – Fremantle branch of WWF.
	Gas Employees' Union	Gas workers in Sydney.
	Hotel, Club and Restaurant Employees	Members in Broken Hill hotels involved in black-banning police.
	Liquor Trades Union	Workers in breweries and soft-drink factories.
LEDFCA	Locomotive Engine Drivers, Firemen & Cleaners Association	Train drivers, firemen and cleaners.
	Manufacturing Groceries Employee's	Workers in soap factories in Melbourne.
	Moulders' Union	Moulders (metal workers).
	Miners' Union	Shorthand term commonly used for ACSEF.

	Painters and Dockers' Union	Workers who cleaned, painted and repaired ships.
	Port Phillip Stevedores	The more conservative of the two Melbourne affiliates of the WWF. Included waterfront foremen.
	Rubber Workers' Union	Employees of Dunlop factory in Melbourne.
	Seamen's Union	Seamen
	Sheet Iron and Metal Workers' Union	Sheet metal workers.
	Storemen and Packers' Union	Warehouse workers.
	Sugar Works Employees' Union	Workers at CSR sugar refineries in Melbourne and Sydney.
	Timberworkers Union	Workers in timber yards in Melbourne and Sydney.
	Traffic Association	Small railway union in NSW competing with ARTSA for coverage of shunters, signalmen etc.
	Tramways Union	Tramway workers.
	Trolley and Draymen's Union	Carters who delivered goods to and from the waterfront (mainly still by horse and cart).
	Victorian Railways Union	All workers on Victorian railways except drivers, firemen and cleaners.
WWF	Waterside Workers Federation	National federation of various state unions covering wharfies.
	Wharf Labourers Union	Common term for the WWF. Also the official title of the larger (and

more militant) of the
Melbourne constituents of
the WWF.