The Active Chorus
Victorian Participation in the Mass Strike of 1917

Robert Bollard
School of Social Sciences
Faculty of Arts
Victoria University
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Disclaimer: This thesis is entirely the product of my own research and has not been previously submitted for academic accreditation.

Signed: [redacted]

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Note on Sources

An unexpected difficulty in researching this topic was the paucity of archival material, particularly trade union records. For a number of the smaller unions whose members were involved in strike action, such as the Artificial Manure Workers' Union (superphosphate workers) and the Rope and Cordage Workers' Union, no records are available. More surprising still is the lack of records from the Melbourne branches of the two waterfront unions involved (or three waterfront unions, if the Ships Painters and Dockers are included). The records of the Victorian Railways Union and the Victorian branch of the ASE also proved elusive, as did most of the records of the Timberworkers' and Seamen's Unions at both federal and state levels. Only the journal of the Timberworkers' Union is available. In the case of the Seamen's Union, the archival record dates from 1918: the Walsh era onwards. The most disappointing gap in the archival record, however, is the absence of any records of the Defence Committee that ran the strike in Melbourne.

Synopsis

In 1917, eastern Australia was in the grip of a mass strike. Of the 97,000 workers who struck for varying periods between August and December 1917, thirteen per cent (over 14,000) were Victorian. This thesis will attempt to redress the historiographical neglect of these Victorian strikes. It will do so by focusing on the conflict between the rank and file of the unions involved and their officials. It will draw upon Rosa Luxemburg's analysis of the phenomenon of the mass strike as well as upon a tradition of Marxist analysis stretching from Luxemburg herself, through Antonio Gramsci to Tony Cliff, which stresses the role of the trade union bureaucracy as a principle buttress of reformism. Seen in this light, any rank and file revolt is a positive development. Indeed, one on the scale of 1917 in eastern Australia is clearly of immense significance. The fact that the strike was disorganised and had no clear strategic direction, while regrettable, does not alter this.

The thesis will, nevertheless, attempt to reassess – or, given its focus on Victoria, begin a reassessment of - the received historiographical wisdom that the strike failed *because* it was spontaneous, and therefore disorganised. Against this view, the thesis will investigate the often cited, but rarely considered, view of many of the workers involved, that the pusillanimity of their officials was to blame for the strike's defeat. It will pay particular attention to the relationship between the officials and the rank and file and to their various attitudes towards the strike. It is expected that such an emphasis will provide new insights into the strike's genesis and a deeper understanding of its significance to and impact on the labour movement.

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Chapter One

`The Active Chorus': Methodology and Literature Review

The original motivation for choosing this research topic was simple: to fill a gap in the historical record. It has, however, become apparent that, in understanding the mass strike of 1917, there are important and complex issues of methodology and interpretation involved. Resolving these is just as pressing as establishing what happened.

The approach followed in this thesis rests firmly within the classical Marxist tradition. In particular it has been informed by Rosa Luxemburg's famous analysis of working class upheaval, *The Mass Strike*, based upon the wave of industrial unrest, both economic and political, that swept Russia in the decade after 1896, culminating in the revolution of 1905. For Luxemburg, these strikes were a vindication of the spontaneous energy and revolutionary enthusiasm of the proletariat, contrasting with the increasing bureaucratisation of the Second International, against which she so tirelessly fought. The pamphlet was part of her battle in defence of Marxist orthodoxy (particularly the principle that socialism could only be brought about by the self-activity of the working class) against the revisionism of Bernstein and the right wing of German Social Democracy.

In 1985, the British Marxist Tony Cliff, reflecting upon the British Miners' Strike of 1984-5, which had just been defeated, revisited Luxemburg's pamphlet in an article for the British journal, *International Socialism,* `Patterns of Mass Strikes'. He did so with an emphasis on the role of the trade union bureaucracy in advanced capitalist countries, drawing upon a tradition of labour history (and at times of revolutionary practice) which has been particularly rich in Britain. From the shop stewards' movements in Glasgow and Sheffield during the First World War, through the Militant Minority of the 1920s, to the Rank and File Groups of the early 1970s, the workers' movement in Britain has developed in a way that at times has starkly counterposed the trade union

bureaucracy to the rank and file. Perhaps the defining statement of this counterposition is the famous declaration of the Clyde Workers' Committee in their first leaflet, printed in November 1915:

> We will support the officials just so long as they rightly represent the workers, but we will act independently immediately they misrepresent them. Being composed of delegates from every shop and untrammelled by obsolete rule of law, we claim to represent the true feeling of the workers. We can act immediately according to the merits of the case and the desire of the rank and file.[1]

The great strikes in Britain in the early 1970s, built as they were upon a strong shop stewards' movement, once again focussed the attention of many academic theorists on the question of rank and file independence. Richard Hyman, for instance, in a book published a year after the miners had brought down the government of Edward Heath, defended the `unofficial strike' against management theorists who view such activity within a conceptual framework dominated by notions of `order' and `chaos':

> Within contemporary capitalism, the element of job control by workers is inherently oppositional, and involves a continuous process of struggle. Formal bargaining and disputes procedures, by contrast, disarm and demobilise trade union members ... only by a readiness to act *unofficially* and `unconstitutionally' can workers maintain a balance of power at all favourable to their own interests ...[2]

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[1] Cited in Alex Callinicos and Mike Simons, *The Great Strike: The Miners' Strike of 1984-5 and its Lessons*, London: Bookmarks, 1985, pp.245-6

[2] Richard Hyman, *Industrial Relations: A Marxist Introduction*, London:Macmillan, 1975, p.159

Elsewhere, Hyman took issue with the analysis common to much of mainstream sociology, in a tradition associated most often with C. Wright Mills (but with antecedents at least as far back as the German sociologist Michels in 1915[3]), which identifies the unions as valuable institutions of social control.[4] As the quote above clearly indicates, Hyman was not inclined to be impressed by the ability of unions to act as organs of social control. As a Marxist his starting point was the declared purpose of unions – not to control their members, but to represent their interests. He posited a theory of `goal displacement' to explain how organs of class struggle, created by the working class, have become instead bastions of class peace.[5]

Tony Cliff belonged to a tradition of Marxist analysis that has taken this observation a step further. He went further than simply stressing the virtues of rank and file independence. Instead, he identified the roots of reformism in advanced capitalist societies as lying within the peculiar class position of the trade union bureaucracy – the people for whom Hyman's `formal bargaining and disputes procedures' are the *sine qua non* of existence. His analysis rejected the traditional Leninist concept of a `labour aristocracy' in favour of one which identified economic prosperity as benefiting *the whole* of the working class in advanced nations. It focused attention therefore, not upon skilled workers, but upon the trade union bureaucracy, as the crucial element in the development of reformism. Central to this was an understanding of the class location of the officials, not as part of the working class, but as brokers between labour and capital. As Cliff wrote in an article in 1957:

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[3] 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. Michels, unlike Mills, did not view his famous `iron law of oligarchy' as a positive. Nevertheless his pessimistic and a-historical concept helped pave the way for other non-Marxist sociological analyses of bureaucracy (such as Mills').

[4] C. Wright Mills, & Helen Schneider, *The new men of power, America's labor leaders*, New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948

[5] Richard Hyman, *Strikes*, London: Macmillan Press, 1989, pp. 79-85

> The expansion of capitalism through imperialism made it possible for the trade unions and Labour Parties to wrest concessions for the workers from capitalism without overthrowing it. This gives rise to a large Reformist bureaucracy which in turn becomes a brake on the revolutionary development of the working class. The major function of this bureaucracy is to serve as a go-between the workers and the bosses, to mediate, negotiate agreements between them, and `keep the peace' between the classes.[6]

This is not to suggest that there were not antecedents for this analysis within the classical Marxist tradition. Luxemburg herself argued in *The Mass Strike*:

> 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 specialization 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...[7]

Antonio Gramsci, writing in the Turin paper, *l'Ordine Nuovo,* in 1919-20, as he attempted to come to grips with a revolutionary

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[6] Tony Cliff, `Economic Roots of Reformism', *Socialist Review*, 1957, Reprinted in: Tony Cliff, *Neither Washington Nor Moscow, Essays in Revolutionary Socialism*, London: Bookmarks, 1982

[7] Rosa Luxemburg, *The Mass Strike*, in: *Selected Political Writings*, (Edited & Translated by Dick Howard), New York & London: Monthly Review Press, 1971, pp.261-2

upsurge in Italy – a country which had a clearly developed trade union bureaucracy - made a similar observation:

> The workers feel that the complex of 'their' organisation, the trade union, has become such an enormous apparatus that it now obeys laws internal to its structure and its complicated functions, but foreign to the masses who have acquired a consciousness of their historical mission ...They feel that even in their own home, in the house they have built tenaciously, with patient effort, cementing it with their blood and tears, the machine crushes man and bureaucracy sterilises the creative spirit.
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> 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...[8]

Informed by this tradition, Cliff's 1985 article revisited *The Mass Strike*, exploring a phenomenon which he described as the `bureaucratic mass strike'.[9] He illustrated this with two examples from the early years of the twentieth century: a general strike called in Sweden in 1909, over wages, and the 1913 Belgian General Strike, called to demand universal suffrage. Both strikes were characterised by rigid control, even including the institution of a trade union `police' to help the official police maintain

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[8] Original in *L'Ordine Nuovo*, reprinted in: Antonio Gramsci, *Soviets in Italy*, Nottingham: Nottingham:Institute for Workers Control, 1969, pp.9-11

[9] Tony Cliff, `Patterns of Mass Strikes', *International Socialism*, No. 29, Summer 85

order. Both deliberately eschewed picketing, mass demonstrations, or any other activity which ran the risk of getting out of the control of the officials. In short, both were characterised by rigid top-down control, and a solemn, orderly passivity. Both strikes were spectacularly unsuccessful.[10] Yet Cliff's analysis was not simply that, where there is a developed bureaucracy, the bureaucratic mass strike prevails whereas, in its absence, revolutionary enthusiasm is allowed free reign. Instead,

> Where the workers are highly organised in trade unions, the extent of their independence from the conservative trade union bureaucracy is largely a function of their confidence in facing the capitalists. The higher the level of organisation and confidence of the rank and file in fighting the capitalists, the more able they are to break the shackles of the bureaucracy, and vice versa. The extent to which a strike is the product of rank and file initiative, determines how near it is to the norm of the mass strike described by Rosa Luxemburg.[11]

Within the context of this analysis, the 1917 mass strike in NSW and Victoria assumes a far more interesting dimension. It took place in the country which, at that time, had (proportionately) the largest trade union movement in the world, with a trade union bureaucracy that was clearly developed, clearly entrenched and politically conservative. Yet the pattern of the strike in many ways more fully resembles Luxemburg's description of pre-revolutionary Russia rather than Cliff's of the bureaucratic mass strike.[12]

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[10] There are a number of examples of this sort in recent Australian history - the 1976 Medibank General Strike being the most obvious.

[11] Cliff, `Patterns of Mass Strikes', pp. 6-7

[12] Ian Turner *Industrial Labour and Politics*, Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 1979, p.141, makes a similar point (though without reference to Luxemburg): `When the general strike came in 1917, it resembled the spontaneous spread of the revolutionary myth anticipated by French theorists, rather than the organised, climactic blow envisaged by the American progenitors of the I.W.W.'

The scope of this thesis is limited: it will focus mainly on the participation of more than 14,000 Victorian workers in the 1917 strike. It will not thus be possible to resolve fully or conclusively the question of where the 1917 strike lies on the continuum between Luxemburg's ideal and the tame, bureaucratic strikes described by Cliff. Nevertheless, the evidence gained by an examination of the strike activity in Victoria, combined with a brief survey of the existing secondary literature on the NSW strike, will, at least, begin to point to an answer.

There is, moreover, a strong possibility that the situation in Victoria played a crucial role in determining the extent and the limitations of the strike, not just in geographical terms, but in terms of its intensity, and of the enthusiasm, accompanying radicalisation and organisation of the rank and file. Victoria was in a sense at the strike's periphery. It therefore demonstrates the extent to which the strike spread. More significantly, the nature of the strikes in Victoria is confirmation of the extent of wartime radicalisation, and of the spread of the industrial/syndicalist impulse that by 1917 had gripped a large part of the Australian working class. Cliff's assessment of Luxemburg is apposite here:

> Rosa Luxemburg's account concentrates on the great dissolving effect of the mass strike on the boundaries between economics and politics in workers' struggles. But she is also clear that it tends to dissolve other barriers as well – sectionalism, regionalism, etc. – at the same time as demonstrating the unbridgeable gulf between the workers' interests and that of the bosses and their state.[13]

As we shall see, seamen, coal miners and waterfront workers, the factory hands at the Colonial Sugar Refinery plant in Yarraville and at Dunlop in Port Melbourne went on indefinite strike. Individual carters,

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[13] Cliff, `Patterns of Mass Strikes', p.6

storemen, and the `boys' and `girls' at the Kitchen & Sons' soap factory in Port Melbourne, chose the sack rather than scab. They did so in support of a small group of railway workers in distant Sydney who were defending themselves against a management determined to increase the Taylorist regimentation of their working lives. Whatever the precise nature of their motives, it is clear that here was a significant dissolution of `sectionalism, regionalism etc'. Whatever conclusions can be drawn from the evidence, it would be unfortunate if the historiographical neglect of these Victorian strikers were to continue. Near the conclusion of *The Mass Strike*, Rosa Luxemburg commented that:

> ...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.[14]

This chorus sang with full voice in 1917, in Victoria as well as NSW. They deserve not to remain silent in history.

For the Victorian strikes in 1917 there are only two secondary sources of any significance. Neither is scholarly, and footnotes and bibliographies are absent. Consequently, the sources of the assertions and judgements they contain can only be surmised. *Ship to Shore*, by Rupert Lockwood, the communist journalist, is a history of the Melbourne waterfront; it devotes a chapter to 1917. This gives a broad narrative of the waterfront strike and mentions the dispute at CSR. It also alludes, fleetingly, to strikes by other groups of workers such as `storemen and

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[14] Rosa Luxemburg, *The Mass Strike*, p. 270

packers and waitresses'.[15] The other is *The Seamen's Union of Australia*, by Brian Fitzgerald and Rowan J. Cahill, which also has a chapter on 1917.[16] It contains an all-too-brief narrative of the dispute between the national leadership of the union in Sydney and the union in Melbourne during the 1917 strike. It describes how the Melbourne branch held out longer than the seamen in Sydney and alleges that it returned after a threat by the Sydney branch to organise scabbing.

For the NSW strike the secondary material is richer. A chapter by Dan Coward in *Strikes: Studies in Twentieth Century Australian Social History*[17], provides an excellent account of the strike. Vere Gordon Childe's *How Labour Governs*, contains much information from someone who experienced the strike first hand. It is particularly valuable regarding the coal miners, including some fascinating detail on the fate of scabs recruited from Victoria to work in the NSW coal mines.[18] Ian Turner's *Industrial Labour and Politics*, as well as providing a useful short narrative of the strike itself, is the classic account of the period. Turner is strongest when dealing with the tension between the `industrialists' within the union movement and the parliamentary leadership of the ALP. He is also invaluable for his charting of the growth of syndicalist views, whether in the hard core, revolutionary form of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) or in the more widespread influence of the `One Big Union' concept. (Turner, of course, devoted another book, *Sydney's Burning*, to

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[15] Rupert Lockwood, *Ship to Shore: a history of Melbourne's waterfront and its union struggles*, Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 1990, p147 `Timberyards were idle, moulders, engineers, boilermakers, storemen and packers, and ironworkers were walking off their jobs, and waitresses were downing cups and plates.'

[16] Brian Fitzgerald, & Rowan J. Cahill, *The Seamen's Union of Australia*, Melbourne: Seamen's Union of Australia, 1981.

[17] 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.

[18] Vere Gordon Childe, *How Labour Governs: A Study of workers' representation in Australia*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1964, p.160 `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

the IWW, as, more recently, have Verity Burgmann and Frank Cain.)[19] The influence of `One Big Union' movement aided in this period the consolidation of craft unions into industrial unions, and of state based unions into federal organisations such as the Australian Railways Union and the Miners' Federation. It was ultimately to lead in the early 1920s to the founding of the ACTU. Turner's narrative of the period clearly locates the 1917 strike within this syndicalist upsurge, showing how the defeat of the strike only served to push this specific radicalisation further.

Richer though the literature on the NSW strike may be, it is still astonishingly thin for such a momentous strike. Moreover, the material that exists is of limited value in assessing the question posed above regarding the relationship of the 1917 strike to the model described by Rosa Luxemburg. The chapter by Coward in *Strikes*, for instance, is mainly concerned with the repression of the strike and its consequences.[20] Otherwise, it is notable that historians have invariably dismissed the strike, not just in the brief space accorded it in wider histories of the period[21], but in terms of its significance. Too often, the strike's defeat has been emphasised to the exclusion of its many positive features – not to mention its wider significance in the development of the labor movement. Vere Gordon Childe's assessment from the 1920s is an early example of this. Comparing the 1917 strike unfavourably with the coal strike the year before, he argued that:

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constant terror from the unionists. So they elected to be repatriated, and most of the unionists drifted back to the pits.'

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

[20] Coward, `Crime and Punishment', p.79: `Our object in this essay has been to expose attitudes to the great strike and to integrate political reactions with the same sources of anxiety.'

[21] Two short paragraphs are devoted to it for instance in Manning Clark, *History of Australia Volume VI: The Old Dead Tree and the Young Tree Green*, Melbourne:

> ... the uselessness of a strike, however widespread and popular, when the forces of labour lack organisation and unitary control – was cruelly demonstrated the next year. In the Great Strike of 1917 there was as much solidarity as in the Coal Strike. The craft unionists and the unskilled fought loyally side by side. But there was no directing plan animating the whole, and the solidarity was misapplied.[22]

Childe's analysis has found echoes in more recent historiography of the strike:

> The strike was spontaneous, badly organised, and mostly led by the rank and file... It succeeded only in worsening the lot of its participants. This dramatic outburst threw the labour movement into turmoil, discredited both moderate union and Labor Party leaders (whose vacillating attitudes towards the strike were blamed for its defeat), [and] impoverished almost all those union organisations that had been dragged by their members headlong into the fight...[23]

The independence of the rank and file from their conservative officials is, in effect, held responsible for the strike's defeat. The conclusion drawn by so many of the strikers at the time, that their officials were to blame, is addressed (tangentially) but not explained. The possibility that the workers may have been right or that, right or wrong, this conviction allowed them to regroup to install a new generation of more radical officials and to mount a series of successful, *offensive*, strikes by 1919, is not explored. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that Australia,

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Melbourne University Press, 1987, pp.63-4. In Clark's *A Short History of Australia*, Melbourne: Macmillan, 1981, there is no mention of the strike at all.

[22] Childe, *How Labour Governs*, p.153

with its historical tradition of communist-led unions, has also bred a tradition of labour history overly influenced by the traditional Stalinist emphasis upon the politics of the union leadership rather than upon the independence and organisational strength of the rank and file.[24]

Even Ian Turner, who is otherwise sympathetic to the radical impulses implicit in the strike, is so focussed upon the conflict between the political and industrial wings of the labour movement that he gives little attention to the tensions *within* the industrial wing (or, to be more precise, to the tensions between the rank and file and the officials as opposed to between the left and the right officials). His conclusion about the strike is correct insofar as it goes.

> ...the necessary conditions for a successful general strike include a [range of factors] which add up to the Leninist definition of a revolutionary situation... [the required] blend of revolutionary will and realistic understanding... was lacking among Australian unionists in 1917...[25]

This statement, however, is insufficient. To argue that the strike could not have led to a revolution is to prove a negative. What is absent here is an assessment of what the strike achieved. One of the tasks of this thesis will be to begin such an assessment.

Luxemburg's *The Mass Strike* contains little discussion about the success or failure of the individual strikes she describes. It does so for a

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

[24] More attention has recently been devoted on the dichotomy between rank-and-file and officials, particularly by 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, pp.39-61. It is significant, however, that Bramble is British and would be the first to admit his theoretical debt to Tony Cliff. See also, Julie Kimber, `"A Case of Mild Anarchy?": Job Committees in the Broken Hill mines c1930 to c1954' *Labour History*, Number 80, May 2001, pp.41-64, which contains a useful discussion of the debate around this dichotomy.

[25] Ian Turner, *Industrial Labour and Politics,* p.160

reason. The point for Luxemburg was not the demands that were raised at each stage of the movement, but the political development of the workers involved. This is not to say that anyone should be indifferent to the fact of defeat. However, whereas the defeat of a bureaucratically called and directed strike is almost guaranteed to be devastating in both its long and short term effects, the defeat of a rebellion on the scale of 1917 may, for the workers involved, contain powerful and positive lessons. An insurgent working class can at times react to a defeat with a determination to fight more effectively rather than with demoralisation and passivity. The rapid recovery of the movement by 1919 would seem to indicate that this was the case after the defeat of the 1917 mass strike in eastern Australia.

Chapter Two
`Solidarity for Ever': the Strike in NSW

SLOW WORK MEANS MORE JOBS
MORE JOBS MEANS LESS UNEMPLOYED
LESS COMPETITION MEANS HIGHER WAGES,
LESS WORK, MORE PAY
(Poster which appeared in Randwick workshops - early 1916)[1]

The origins of the Great Strike are, at least at first glance, famously trivial. The management of the railway workshops in Eveleigh and Randwick in Sydney wanted to introduce a new `card system' to monitor the work of their employees. The employees objected and went on strike. Within weeks, nearly a hundred thousand workers, most of them in NSW, had walked off the job. Why this apparently mundane dispute should have triggered such a dramatic response from the labour movement has baffled many, including the Melbourne *Argus* at the time, which commented: `No rational person can believe that rational men have worked themselves into this rebellious fever upon an issue so trifling.'[2]

To understand why, it is first necessary to have some understanding of what the `card system' involved. The new system was ostensibly about recording the work practices of the employees (most of whom were highly skilled metal-workers used to working with a minimum of supervision). It was part of a general process that had accelerated throughout the industrialised world during the First World War of `dilution' (the replacement of skilled by unskilled or semi-skilled labour). This was accompanied by the fragmentation of the work process into simple repetitive operations - in general, speeding up the process of work. The process had a name `Taylorism', after its American advocate, F. W. Taylor, and was feared with good reason by the workers in Randwick and Eveleigh. As a representative of the men was later to put it, the Railway Commission officers

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[1] Turner, *Industrial Labour and Politics,* pp.142-3

> were reading American literature, and they [the union] 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.[3]

The other great concern of the workers was with the effect of the card system on union organisation. One of the three cards in the system, the dreaded `white card', was to be filled out by a sub-foremen and its contents kept secret from the workers whose work it ostensibly recorded.[4] They naturally feared that this could be used as a tool for victimising militants. The system, moreover, involved the promotion of eighty workers to become subforemen, breaking the ranks of the union and rewarding `loyalists'.[5]

A more important explanation for why this dispute escalated to such proportions must be located in an understanding of the historical context. The Australian working class in late 1917 had experienced three tumultuous years. It had endured a war that had claimed already tens of thousands of young Australian lives, and which, at the same time as the strike, was to claim another ten thousand more through the muddy horror of Passchendaele.[6] The war had initially been accompanied by a surge of unemployment, and, when that abated, by rampant inflation which cut working class living standards (especially as the rise in the price of basic food was particularly steep).[7]

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[2] *Argus*, 13 August 1917, p.6

[3] Evidence, 75, Royal Commission on Job and Time Cards System. 1918, cited in K.P. Buckley, *The Amalgamated Engineers in Australia*. Canberra: Department of Economic History, ANU, 1970, pp.266-7.

[4] Buckley, K. P. *The Amalgamated Engineers in Australia*, p.258.

[5] *Ibid.*, p.259

[6] C.E.W. Bean, *Official History of Australia in The War of 1914-18: Vol. VI, The AIF in France 1917,* Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1933, pp. 683-784

[7] *The Victorian Yearbook, 1917-18*, pp.1158-9, 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, pp. 115, 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%

Beginning with a successful strike at Broken Hill in 1915[8], the war, which had begun with scenes of unprecedented patriotic enthusiasm and consequent industrial peace, saw instead a steady increase in industrial struggle. The strike wave, which built most dramatically in 1916 and 1917, was clearly a response to wartime inflation.[9] It was also fueled by a working class radicalisation that was intensified by the experience of war. The casualties in Gallipoli were dwarfed by the carnage on the Western Front, where the bulk of the AIF was fighting after 1916. The Easter Uprising in April of that year helped propel those with Irish Catholic backgrounds (a significant section of the working class) into, or at least towards, opposition to the war. This was especially so in Victoria where the Irish firebrand, Archbishop Mannix, helped to stoke the fires of discontent. The first conscription referendum in late 1916 helped crystalise the anti-war mood. It also strengthened the linkage between the strike wave and the political radicalisation as it inspired a one-day general strike against conscription on 4 October 1916. The call came from Victoria, and it was there, followed by Sydney, that the response was strongest.[10]

A key indicator of this radicalisation was the growth of the far left. In Victoria, the Victorian Socialist Party (VSP), in something of a decline and moving rightwards before the war, shifted to the left and grew in size and influence.[11] In January 1917 the VSP recruited Adela

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rise in prices and a 1.75% drop in real wages in NSW from 1914-17. The Piddington Royal Commission in 1920 established a much higher figure that implied something in the order of a 30% drop in real wages between 1911 and 1919 – Morris Graham, *A.B. Piddington: the last radical liberal*, Sydney: UNSW Press, 1995 , pp.80-89

[8] Gilbert Giles Roper & Wendy & Alan Scarfe (eds.) *Labor's Titan: the story of Percy Brookfield 1878-1921*, Warnambool: Warnambool Institute Press, contains an excellent discussion of the strike in Broken Hill.

[9] Burgmann, *Revolutionary Industrial Unionism*, p.155. 1916 saw 1.7 million strike days lost.

[10] Turner, *Industrial Labour and Politics*, p.109. The motion for the stop work was moved by the young John Curtin.

[11] Frank Farrell, *International Socialism & Australian Labour: The Left in Australia*, Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 1971, pp.11-27. They had 350-500 members by 1917.

Pankhurst[12] who, by September, along with Jenny Baines, was leading thousands of working class women in riotous demonstrations against rising food prices in streets darkened by the Great Strike.[13] In Sydney it was the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) that grew. They had been the first to clearly and defiantly oppose the war. By early 1917 they claimed nearly 2,000 members[14], all of them, by the IWW's own rules, wage earners[15], and most of them in New South Wales. In conjunction with the growth of the IWW, there was a more general spread of syndicalist ideas, particularly the doctrine of `One Big Union'. In Broken Hill, revolutionary syndicalists would eventually achieve the election of one of their number, Percy Brookfield, a rank and file militant from amongst the ranks of the underground miners, to the NSW Parliament.[16]

A curious quote from the *Age* of 21 August 1917 illustrates the shift leftward, caught, as it were, in midstream. One J. Cadden, the Vigilance Officer for the Melbourne Wharf Labourers' Union, was quoted at length defending the strikers against charges of disloyalty. His chief defence was to recall the stance taken by waterfront workers in 1914 when they demanded that `enemy aliens' (wharfies born in Germany) be removed from the port so that they would not be a `danger to shipping'. He then continued that four of these aliens had recently been offered lucrative employment supervising scabs but had refused, stating that they had `never been a scab'.[17] When confronted by a journalist questioning his loyalty he recited the first anecdote to prove the

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[12] J.M. Bomford, *That Dangerous and Persuasive Woman: Vida Goldstein*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1993, p.173

[13] Smart, `Feminists Food and the Fair Price', pp.113-131

[14] Burgmann, *Revolutionary Industrial Unionism*, p.126. Around 1500 of these lived in Sydney. 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: George 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. The circulation of its paper, *Direct Action*, was, at its height, around 15,000.

[15] Turner, *Sydney's Burning*, p.29

[16] Roper & Scarfe, *Labor's Titan*, pp.57-64. He was elected first in a by-election in January 1917.

wharfies' xenophobic credentials. Then, in stark contrast to the argument he was trying to make, he slid into the second point about the class-consciousness of the once-despised `aliens'. The shift from an emphasis on loyalty to nation to loyalty to class is exposed – partial and contradictory as all such shifts must be.

For Australian workers in 1917 there were, then, a range of factors which brought about a seismic shift in their attitudes to political and industrial questions. We are familiar today with the often vague and inchoate discontent brought about by economic rationalism and globalisation. In 1917, economic discontent intersected with a World War that was plunging ever deeper into senseless slaughter. `Bread and butter' issues and `the big picture' were not competing for attention, but reinforcing each other. By late 1916 the coal miners had won a spectacular victory, and the Broken Hill miners had won the 44 hour week, largely inspired by an IWW slogan (which many wore on badges): `If you want the 44 hour week then take it!'[18] Discontent was feeding a radicalisation that in turn underlay an increasing confidence amongst workers in their industrial strength.

In this environment, it took very little to provoke a mass confrontation between the classes; hence the mass strike which swept through NSW in 1917.[19] The initial walkout by 5,780 workers in the rail and tramway workshops in Sydney, Newcastle and Goulburn on Thursday 2nd of August 1917 was followed by the most astonishing rank and file revolt in the history of Australian trade unionism. Within a week there

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[17] *Age*, 21 August 1917, p.5

[18] Turner, *Industrial Labour and Politics,* p. 86 describes the 44 hour week strike as `a revolt of rank-and-file militancy against the most militant union leadership then existing in Australia.'

[19] Lucy Taksa, `"Defence Not Defiance" Social Protest and the NSW General Strike of 1917', *Labour History*, No. 60, May 1991, pp.16-33, investigates the dimension of social protest in the strike. In reply to Childe's criticisms of the strike she investigates the extent to which the strikers were motivated by the extent to which `the government's support for the card system ... affronted the moral compact with the state which working class people believed to exist.' (p.19) Her argument is that this dimension of moral protest undercuts Childe's tactical and strategic arguments against the strike.

were 30,000 on strike; within a fortnight 50,000. The maximum figure of 69,000 on strike at one time (in NSW) was reached in early September. More significant than the speed with which the strike spread was the *way* in which it spread (hence the term `rank and file revolt'). The NSW Legislative Assembly commissioned a report on the strike in 1918 which listed the workplaces involved, with the dates they walked out and the dates they returned.[20] The report appears more like a detailed accounting ledger than a description of a strike – the reason being that each workplace clearly decided to strike individually, resulting in a multitude of entries.

So, for instance, the coal miners mostly went on strike, pit by pit, between 3 and 10 August, different groups of wharfies between 10 and 13 August and a range of engineering workplaces from 10 to 31 August.[21] Even when a group of workers went on strike *as a union*, they often did so unofficially – the seamen, for instance, at a well-attended (but unconstitutional) mass meeting, and against the advice of their officials.[22] Even Willis and Baddeley, the miners' leaders, who were probably the most militant officials in the country (at least outside of Broken Hill), were opposed to a stoppage. They opposed it on the not unreasonable grounds that coal reserves were too plentiful. However, they could not hold the rank and file of the lodges in.[23] The Secretary of the NSW Labor Council, E.J. Kavanagh, was later to assess the situation: `the difficulty was not in getting men to come out, but to keep them in.'[24] When, on 18 August, the Government arrested the three leading members of the Defence Committee (an *ad hoc* body set up by the Trades and Labor Council to run the strike), Kavanah, Willis and Claude Thompson of the NSW Rail and Tramways Union (ARTSA), Broken Hill went out

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[20] Noel Butlin Archives, Australian National University [henceforth NBA, ANU], E165/9/3, Report to the NSW Legislative Assembly, `The New South Wales Strike Crisis', 5 February 1918, pp. 58-60.
[21] *Ibid.*
[22] *Age*, 14 August 1917, p.6
[23] Turner, *Industrial Labour and Politics*, p.148

in protest.[25] It seemed at this stage that the strike might have continued escalating.

The response of the State and Federal Governments, both conservative (albeit, in the case of the Federal Government, under the leadership of the renegade Hughes), was, however, prompt and decisive. By 6 August the Farmers and Settlers' Association and the Primary Producers' Union were being mobilised to provide scab labour. The response was so large that from 14 August the strikebreakers had to be camped at the Sydney Cricket Ground and Taronga Zoo.[26] It was not only the working class for whom the times were cataclysmic. The rebellion in Ireland, the unfolding revolution in Russia, the IWW (which many fervently believed had planned to burn down Sydney[27]) were all part of a pattern of disorder and disloyalty, in the midst of war, that provoked the middle class to mobilise. The mobilisation of middle class and rural volunteers to break the strike has been noted as the origin of the secret armies that would haunt the politics of the interwar years.[28]

In response to this, the strikers had an organisation – of sorts. The Defence Committee had been formed with delegates from each of the striking unions. The enthusiasm of the workers involved can be guaged from the impressive demonstrations that crowded the Domain during August and September. Almost daily demonstrations of thousands, reaching up to 100,000 on Sundays, gathered to hear speeches.[29] The

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[24] NSW. Labour Council, *Report*, cited in Turner, *Industrial Labour and Politics*, p.147
[25] Coward `Crime and Punishment', p. 57. See also Turner, *Industrial Labour and Politics*, p.152 and *Age*, 20 August 1917, p. 7.
[26] Turner, *Industrial Labour and Politics*, p.151
[27] See Turner, *Sydney's Burning*
[28] Michael Cathcart, *Defending the National Tuckshop: Australia's Secret Army Intrigue of 1931*, Melbourne: McPhee Gribble, 1988. See also Andrew Moore, *The Secret Army and the Premier*, Sydney: UNSW Press, 1989, pp19-22: `Indeed the *Labour Daily's* subsequent assertion of the links between the "farmers army" [rural `volunteers' in 1917] and the Old Guard were well founded. And the names *were* kept. Perusal of the records in the papers of the Farmers' and Settlers' Association suggests many instances of shared personnel.'
[29] Coward, `Crime and Punishment', p.62; *Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 August 1917, p.8 stated that `various estimates' of the previous day's rally varied from 80,000 to 150,000. On 27 August 1917, p.8 it gave its own estimate for the next Sunday's rally as 100,000.

rallies had colour and spirit as well as size. One of the earliest provided an opportunity for some of the women in the crowd to upset the *Sydney Morning Herald* by hooting and swearing at scab tram drivers.[30] A week later a contingent of `daintily clad' waitresses from the railway refreshment rooms joined the protests, astonishing the paper by singing `Solidarity for Ever'.[31] Unfortunately, the forces mobilising to crush the strike could easily have replied with words from *The Ballad of 1891*, recording how another great strike had been beaten: `You can have your fill of speeches but the final strength is ours.' Without a strategy to deal with the mass scabbing, the demonstrations were only valuable as a means of keeping up morale; they could not win the strike.

The Defence Committee seems to have realised early on that it had no strategy to win. As early as 20 August it made a secret offer to resume under a modified card system, which the Government rejected.[32] From 31 August the leaders of the Defence Committee were involved in secret negotiations, using the Lord Mayor of Sydney as an intermediary.[33] The Government remained intransigent and the Committee capitulated, officially calling off the railway strike on the Government's terms from 10 September. The sell-out was denounced at a series of furious mass meetings and many of the strikers held out but, without official support, the last of the railway strikers drifted back by 19 September.[34]

The end of the strike in the railways forced the miners to begin negotiating for a return to work. The government refused to allow them to return to work as a body; instead they had to apply individually. Around 350 were victimised; one pit, Richmond Main, was opened entirely with scab labour, and all pits had some scabs working.[35] The

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[30] *Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 August 1917, p.8
[31] *Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 August 1917, p.8
[32] Turner, *Industrial Labour and Politics,* p.152
[33] *Ibid.*, p.152; Coward, `Crime and Punishment', p.59
[34] Coward, `Crime and Punishment', p.59.
[35] Turner, *Industrial Labour and Politics,* pp.155-6. The situation at Richmond Main was serious enough to be a major item of discussion by the miners at distant Wonthaggi.

peculiar conditions of the mines would eventually, as we have seen, allow the miners to drive these scabs out almost to a man, but for the moment they were defeated. The waterside workers were in the weakest position. They had been almost completely replaced by strikebreakers, most of whom were not simply professionals or university students `doing their bit', but replacements who wished to remain permanently. They were initially offered work only if they signed a paper repudiating membership of the union – which some 2,000 did. It was fortunate that the labour market in the next two years was to be relatively tight; even so it would take the union a long time to recover its strength.[36] Employer intransigence and the presence of scabs kept the NSW seamen out until 8 October, when they finally returned on the employer's terms.[37] The northern miners were the last group in NSW to return to work, but as we shall see in Chapter Three, it was in Victoria that the last groups of strikers were to hold out.

NBA ANU, E164/2/6, Powlett River Branch of ACSEF & WIU, Minutes, 28 October 1917

[36] Turner, *Industrial Labour and Politics,* pp.156-7

[37] *Ibid.*, p.157

Chapter Three

`The shrieks of women and the hoots of senseless young men': the strike in Victoria

The strike in Victoria began, not where one might have expected, on the railways, but on the waterfront. It took the seaborne rather than the overland route. There was militancy amongst some sections of the railways, as we shall see, but others, especially the engine drivers, were particularly conservative. The Melbourne waterfront, by contrast, was already in dispute when news reached the wharfies that their comrades in Sydney were on strike.

For most of 1917, the Melbourne wharfies had been in dispute over the export of wheat, which they objected to at a time of rising food prices.[1] They had banned, in particular, the export of food to neutral countries such as Holland, from whence they believed much of it was sold again to Germany.[2] By August, they had gained sufficient confidence to launch a dispute over conditions (and, indirectly, over wages). They objected to the fact that, after having been assigned to a ship, they then had to make their own way to various pick-up points around the port and be paid only from the time of arrival. Instead they wanted to establish a single central pick-up point at the Flinders Street extension, and to be remunerated for the time it took to travel to and from their assigned ship.

On the morning of 13 August, the wharfies assembled at the Flinders Street extension. No one picked them up and the port was idle for the day. That evening a mass meeting of 1,000 met and voted - in view of the imminent arrival of ships loaded by strikebreakers in Sydney - that the time was ripe to abandon the dispute concerning a central pick-up.

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[1] Margo Beasley, *Wharfies: a history of the Waterside Workers' Federation of Australia*, Rushcutters' Bay, NSW: Australian National Maritime Museum, 1996, p.48

[2] Lockwood, *Ship to Shore*, pp. 138-139: `...a discharged soldier approached the lumpers to tell them that in captured German trenches flour bags bearing a WA mill marking were found by Australian soldiers.'

The strike was to continue, not as an offensive strike over conditions, but as a defensive strike in solidarity with the men in Sydney.[3]

The Waterside Workers' Federation[4] also covered a number of the labourers who were employed at this time unloading the wheat harvest at railway depots in Brooklyn, Newport, Williamstown and Geelong, and these ceased work along with the rest of the union.[5] The night watchmen at these sites went out as well, to the horror of their own very conservative union, which almost immediately promised to find replacements.[6]

On the next day (14 August) a meeting of representatives from the Railway Unions of Queensland, NSW and Victoria met at Unity Hall in Collins Street. The NSW delegates reassured the Victorian officials that they had no desire for solidarity action from the Victorian union. In any case, one Melbourne delegate was reported by the *Age* as declaring, `there are too many scabs in Victoria for any successful industrial effort.'[7] The line from the local officials of the Seamen's Union, at a large meeting of their members that same night, was that they had had no word from Sydney and that, in the absence of an instruction from the Federal Executive of the union, any action that was taking place interstate would be unconstitutional. This line prevailed, but not without resistance, as the *Age* relates:

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[3] *Age*, 14 August 1917, pp.5-6

[4] Lockwood, *Ship to Shore*, pp.101-8. The Federation included two formally separate unions (which still, at this stage, maintained their own separate officials) within its ambit, the Melbourne Wharf Labourers and the Port Philip Stevedores.

[5] None of the newspaper sources mentions which union was involved. However, University of Melbourne Archives [henceforth UMA] Trades Hall Council (Microfilm record), Executive Committee Minutes[henceforth VTHC, EC Minutes), 14 January 1918, relate a dispute re. `working with the wheat' and how to deal with a `scab union' set up after the strike. The dispute regarded a complaint by the Waterside Workers that the AWU were attempting to muscle in by allowing their members to join the `scab union' thereby transgressing on traditional WWF ground.

[6] *Age*, 15 August 1917, p.9

[7] *Ibid.*

> 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.[8]

By 16 August, it was becoming clear that the union might have trouble keeping the seamen from striking, once strikebreakers 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.*[9]

The following morning (Friday, 17 August), the workers at the Colonial Sugar Refinery's (CSR) Yarraville factory 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.[10] That same morning the crews of at least three ships had walked off the job; the seamen were beginning to ignore their officials and vote with their feet.[11] A meeting of the Sugar Workers' Union on 19 August voted not to unload the *Kadina*.[12] 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

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[8] *Ibid.*
[9] *Age*, 17 August 1917, p.8. Emphasis added.
[10] *Age*,18 August 1917, p.11
[11] *Ibid.*
[12] 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

today'.[13] Faced with the choice of scabbing or being laid off, they had chosen to strike.

On Sunday 19 August a mass meeting of 2,000 wharfies confirmed the decision to strike.[14] The next day the State Coal Mine in Wonthaggi joined the strike in retaliation for the gaoling of their union's President, Willis, in Sydney.[15] On 21 August, as strikebreakers began unloading ships, the remaining seamen began walking off ship by ship rather than work with them.[16] They were joined the next day by the 100 men of the small, privately owned, Powlett North mine in Wonthaggi.[17] The Jumbunna mine near Korumburra joined later in the week.[18] Simultaneously, painters and dockers began refusing to work on ships being unloaded by strikebreakers,[19] and 200 members of the Artificial Manure Trades Union, walked out at the Mount Lyell Co. in Yarraville rather than handle a `black' cargo of superphosphate.[20] By the next day, 500 members of the union were out.[21] That evening, independently of their officials, a meeting of shunters at Spencer Street voted to ban the handling of any goods sent from Sydney or otherwise handled by scabs.[22] As an *Age* reporter had already commented:

> 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

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[13] ANU, NBA, CSR papers, 142/204, Letter from CSR Yarraville to Head Office (Sydney), 24 August 1917
[14] *Age*, 20 August 1917, p.7
[15] *Age*, 21 August 1917, p.5; *Argus*, 21 August 1917, p.5
[16] *Age*, 22 August 1917, p.8; *Argus*, 22 August 1917, p.7
[17] *Age*, 23 August 1917, p.8
[18] *Age*,27 August 1917, p.7
[19] *Age*, 23 August 1917, p.8; *Argus*, 23 August 1917, p.5
[20] *Argus*, 23 August 1917, p.5.
[21] *Argus*, 24 August 1917, p.7
[22] *Age*, 24 August 1917, p.5

> least militant among them are to be found among the shunters. The engine drivers are not keen on striking.[23]

The shunters had already organised their own ballot as early as Monday 20 August, but as the *Age* remarked:

> 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.[24]

There is no evidence of whether these shunters were able to enforce their ban. The likelihood is that they never did so, and that they never joined the strike. The Bureau of Statistics was later to record that, for the whole of 1917, Victoria lost only 270 days to strike action in the entire rail and tram sector.[25] It would seem, then, that the shunters were not able to defy their officials beyond moving motions.

A pattern was emerging in Victoria. As in New South Wales, the strikes were largely begun upon the initiative of the rank and file. Yet, unlike in Sydney, there were few cases of workers walking off in a pure display of solidarity, and the union officials were often (as in the shunters' case) more successful in restraining the rank and file. The coal miners went out because their national leader had been gaoled. The wharfies, and most of the seamen, were motivated by a desire not to handle `black' goods or to work with scabs. (As we have seen, the seamen drew a distinction between the unloading of ships by officers or waterfront clerks, which they did not consider scabbing, and the same work being carried out by `volunteers', to which they violently objected.) The CSR workers had been faced with a choice of scabbing on the wharfies or being stood down;

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[23] *Age*, 23 August 1917, p.8
[24] *Age*, 25 August 1917, p.11
[25] Bureau of Census & Statistics, *Commonwealth Labour and Industrial Branch Report, No.8*, July 1918, p.128

they accepted the latter option, though they clearly had converted the lockout to a strike with a mass picket in place by 24 August.

The same principle was to inspire the next batch of strikers. The Master Carters and Drivers' Association had avoided taking a formal position on whether to ban the handling of goods from the waterfront, leaving it up to the conscience of individual members.[26] The militants in the union, dissatisfied with this, forced their officials to call a meeting on Sunday 26 August. They 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.[27] 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.[28] That Sunday saw another `well attended' mass meeting of wharfies at Guild Hall reject the call of their national leader, Morris, for a ballot to return to work. (The *Age* was to report the next day that Morris was planning to hold the ballot anyway[29]).

The *Argus* on 28 August gave the following breakdown of the numbers of workers `affected by the trouble in this state':

Boot makers:	500
Carter & Drivers:	500
Miners	1,500
Confectionary Employees:	2,000
Fuel Employees	300
Match Makers	600

[26] *Argus,* 24 August 1917, p.7, reported that the `more militant section' of the carters were already banning `black' goods.
[27] *Age*, 25 August 1917, p.11 & 27 August 1917, p.7; *Argus,* 27 August 1917, p.5
[28] *Age*, 27 August 1917, p.7; *Argus,* 27 August 1917, p.5

Superphosphate Workers	500
Stevedores	500
Seamen	200
Sugar Workers	400
Timberyard Employees	2,100
Timber Stackers	200
Wharf Labourers	3,000
Others: including boilermakers, engineers, engine-drivers, ironworkers, manufacturing grocers, furniture makers	
Etc	300[30]

There are some problems with these figures. A number of categories, such as the `fuel employees', the `confectionary employees', and the `match makers' (presumably employees of Bryant & May rather than arrangers of marriages) had been laid off; they were not on strike. There are also some contradictions with a similar, but less comprehensive, list published on the same day by the *Age*.[31] Nevertheless it gives a picture of a mass strike which was building towards its full quota, as registered the next year by the Bureau of Census and statistics, of over 14,000 strikers in Victoria.[32]

The strike continued to build for at least another week. On 28 August, a meeting of 400 Storemen and Packers narrowly rejected a push from militants to ban the handling of `black' goods.[33] On Thursday 30 August, a mass meeting of wharfies again rejected Morris's desire for a ballot - he had obviously abandoned the idea of imposing it without

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[29] *Age,* 28 August 1917, p.5
[30] *Argus*, 28 August 1917, p.5
[31] *Age*, 28 August 1917, p.5. The *Age* list, for instance, gives the number of striking seamen as 400 rather than 200.
[32] Bureau of Census & Statistics, *Commonwealth Labour and Industrial Branch Report, No.8, July 1918, `Strike Crisis', App. 1*, p.122, estimated that 97,507 struck nationally, of which 13% (14,200) were in Victoria.
[33] *Age*, 29 August 1917, p.7; *Argus,* 29 August 1917, p.7

endorsement from another meeting - and 500 workers in six more timber mills walked out.[34]

On 29 August, 6,000 strikers rallied on the Yarra bank where they was addressed by Vida Goldstein and Cecilia John from the Women's Political Association (WPA), both from atop a car draped with a banner reading `Workers of the World Unite'. Adela Pankhurst then persuaded the crowd to `roll up' to Federal Parliament. It duly followed her to the intersection of Flinders and Swanston where an attempt by mounted police to disperse it was repelled. The demonstration was blocked from reaching Parliament by a solid barrier of police. 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.[35]

Behind the police lines that protected them from Adela Pankhurst and her rampaging throng, the members of Federal Parliament discussed the apparently fearful rumour 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.[36] The following day Pankhurst led another crowd of 10,000 from the Yarra Bank in a similar attempt to reach the Federal Parliament.[37]

Adela Pankhurst was not the only woman to play a prominent part in the dispute. On the other side of the class divide, the government was faced with the interesting conundrum of how to make use of Melbourne's

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[34] *Age*, 30 August 1917, p.7
[35] *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*.
[36] *Age,* 30 August, p.7

greatest celebrity. As the Victorian ALP's official organ, *Labor Call*, put it:

> Madame Melba has offered to place the services of herself and her pupils at the disposal of the Government in its hour of need. We naturally conclude that she has a dual motive in adopting this novel avocation of humping wheat – that of prolonging the dying efforts of `Win the War' and of expanding her respiratory organs.[38]

In the end, Melba settled for serenading the scabs on the waterfront. Cecilia Johns, the financial secretary of the Vida Goldstein's Women's Political Association, made use of her `fine contralto' voice to sing an anti-war song to the strikers and drown out Melba to the best of her ability.[39]

On Friday 31 August, a handful of carters and (for the first time) storemen join the strike.[40] 400 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.[41] On Sunday 2 September, 1,200 carters rallied at Guild Hall and the Storeman and Packers met again, this time voting officially to ban the handling of `black' goods.[42] They were perhaps encouraged by the rally of 30,000 that filled the Yarra Bank that day – a bigger demonstration than during the Conscription Referendum of 1916.[43] *Labor Call*, whilst concentrating most of its reportage to the official speeches, nevertheless mentioned that Adela Pankhurst was given a `rousing cheer' as she left the

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[37] *Argus,* 31 August 1917, p.5
[38] *Labor Call*, 30 August 1917, p.9; *Argus,* 24 August 1917, p.7 added the interesting fact that Melba's son, George Armstrong, was working as a `volunteer' on the waterfront.
[39] Lockwood, *Ship to Shore*, pp.174-5
[40] *Argus,* 31 August 1917, p.5
[41] *Age*, 1 September 1917, p.13; *Argus,* 1 September 1917, p.19
[42] *Age*, 3 September 1917, p.5; *Argus,* 3 September 1917, p.5
[43] Bomford, *That Dangerous and Persuasive Woman*, p. 181, provides the comparison with the first conscription referendum. *The Socialist*, 7 September 1917, p.4 argued that the figure of 30,000 should be doubled.

demonstration.[44] Any strikers (or potential strikers) who attended St John's Catholic Church in Clifton Hill that Sunday would also have had their faith strengthened by a spirited speech by Archbishop Mannix defending the strikers. He made a particular point of attacking Taylorism.[45]

By 4 September the *Age* was reporting 15,858 `idle' (either on strike or laid off); 200 Storemen and Packers had joined the strike. It also trumpeted the first significant break in the strikers' ranks as the boilermakers at the State Ship Yards (who had gone on strike on 24 August) returned to work. In the next few days, moves by the Boilermakers' Union, the Amalgamated Society of Engineers (ASE) and the Shipwrights to get the Defence Committee to formally exempt the Dockyards from the strike would lead to these three unions being expelled from the Committee.[46] The defection of the ASE, whose members in Sydney were the original cause of the dispute, was particularly galling. The union had proven capable of instructing its Victorian members not to strike (as we shall see in Chapter Four), but incapable of standing up to a handful who wanted to scab.[47] The Moulders' Union, with a history of antagonism towards the ASE, was rumoured to be considering strike action simply to ensure that the engineers would be punished by being laid off.[48]

The strike movement, however, more than made up for this defection as, on 5 September, 1,250 workers at Dunlop's Montague

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[44] *Labor Call*, 6 September 1917, p.4: `Miss Pankhurst was loudly cheered as she was leaving the grounds.'

[45] *Age*, 3 September 1917, p.6. *Labor Call*, 23 August 1917, p.4, also reports an earlier speech by Mannix `at Newport' in which he defended the strikers against the inequities of `the American system'.

[46] *Age*, 4 September 1917, p.5. *Argus*, 4 September 1917, p.5

[47] UMA, Sugar Workers Employees of Australia papers, Minutes, 1 / 2, 4 September 1917, complained, regarding CSR in Yarraville, that the ASE members were still working and that the union refused to `order or advise' them to cease work. It wasn't only at the Dockyards that the ASE was proving a disappointment.

[48] *Age*, 4 September 1917, p.5. *Argus*, 5 September 1917, p.7 also quotes AJ Pearce at a rally in Yarraville declaring that an unspecified `union of skilled artisans' (clearly the ASE) had been declared `black' by the Defence Committee.

factory (`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.[49] 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'.[50] The rest of the 300 employees at Kitchen & Sons went out the next day in protest, along with another 300 other members of their union, the Manufacturing Grocers', at two similar companies, Parsons Bros. and Lewis and Whitty.[51] In addition to these, another factory in the trade, McKenzies, 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.[52] It was to be the last substantial addition to the strike in Victoria, which by now was responsible for 20,000 Victorian workers either on strike or laid off.[53]

On 8 September both Melbourne dailies announced an imminent settlement in Sydney[54], and two days later came the news that the Defence Committee in Sydney had capitulated.[55] Suddenly, the strike in Victoria had lost its *raison d'etre.* There was little point in staying out once the railway workshops in Sydney had returned. The problem, however, was *how* to return. What, in other words, was to be done with the scabs?

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[49] *Age*, 6 September 1917, p.8. *Argus,* 6 September 1917, p.5
[50] *Age*, 6 September 1917, p.8. *Argus,* 6 September 1917, p.5
[51] *Age,* 7 September 1917, p.5
[52] 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...'
[53] *Age*, 10 September 1917, p.5, 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.
[54] *Age*, 8 September 1917, p.13. *Argus*, 8 September 1917, p.19
[55] *Age*, 10 September 1917, p.5. *Argus*, 10 September 1917, p.7

From almost the beginning, the government had responded by recruiting `volunteers'. The scale of the strike in Victoria was smaller and there was consequently not the same demand for strikebreakers as in NSW. As a result, fewer were recruited from rural areas than from the city: only sixty eight farmers and thirty one farm labourers, for instance, amongst the 400 registered by the Labour Bureau on 21 August.[56] There was, therefore, no need for special camps to house them as in Sydney. This is not to suggest that there was no recruiting in the country: Hughes had announced as early as 16 August that Bureaus were to be set up in provincial towns in NSW and Victoria and had asked for Mayors to organise and head them.[57] A number of the rural recruits from Victoria were, as we know, sent to the NSW coal mines rather than to Melbourne.

An advertisement appeared in the *Age* on 20 August calling on volunteers to register for `National Service'. Under a Commonwealth Government logo, it advised that:

> The principle classes of work for which men may be required are coaling, loading, discharging, despatching, working ships, handling wheat, flour, foodstuffs, &c.[58]

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 Atheneum in Collins Street. It reassured potential strikebreakers 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.'[59]

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[56] *Age*, 22 August 1917, p.7
[57] *Age*, 17 August 1917, p.7
[58] *Age*, 20 August 1917, p.10
[59] *Age*, 21 August 1917, p.5

As the strike developed over the next weeks, the *Age* and the *Argus* were able to provide their 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. 20 August was the turning point. 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.[60] Even the Red Cross offered its support to the strikebreaking effort.[61] 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).[62]

The first priority of the 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'.[63] 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).[64]

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[60] *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 Archbishop Mannix from across the sectarian divide.

[61] *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.

[62] *Age*, 21 August 1917, p.5 and 22 August 1917, p.7

[63] *Age*, 17 August 1917, p.7

[64] *Age*, 21 August 1917, p.6

Scotch College boys were engaged to paint a Commonwealth Steamer in place of striking painters and dockers.[65]

By 22 August, thirteen of the thirty-two ships in port were being worked by volunteer labour. As the seamen went off in response, an effort was made to secure the lifeline between Melbourne and Tasmania with `volunteer' crews[66]. We know that some `volunteers' were directed to work as carters and drivers because their presence in some cases (such as at Kitchen and Sons) provoked walkouts. The manager of CSR informed his head office in Sydney on 28 August that: `I engaged 50 volunteers at the Bureau this morning.'[67]

Who were these `volunteers'? The *Age* gave breakdowns of the first two days' registrations based on categories such as `professionals', `employers', `students', `clerks' etc. Around one half of the volunteers were blue-collar workers (`labourers' and `artisans').[68] These were potentially the most important strategically as they were likely to be unemployed and, therefore, potentially permanent replacements for the strikers rather than middle class adventurers `doing their bit'. By the strike's end there were over 1,000 strikebreakers working on the waterfront. Even if only half of these wished to continue after the emergency (and by this late stage it makes sense that fewer middle class volunteers would be present than in the initial recruitment rush), they would have represented a problem for the wharfies – 500 odd compared to around 3,000 strikers. They had, in any case, signaled the intention of a number of them to remain permanently on the waterfront by forming a `union' and registering with the Arbitration Commission. All of this made it impossible for the wharfies to return. As the *Age* summed it up:

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[65] *Age*, 24 August 1917, p.5; *Argus*, 24 August 1917, p.7 records that a number of Masters from Melbourne Grammar had joined their senior boys on the waterfront.
[66] *Age,* 23 August 1917, p.8
[67] NBA ANU, CSR papers, 142/204, Letter from Manager CSR Yarraville to Head Office, 28 August 1917
[68] *Age* 21 August 1917, p.5 and 22 August 1917, p.7

> 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.[69]

A number of employers were determined to seize the opportunity to turn the screw on their employees and their unions. The manager of the privately-owned coal mine at Jumbunna refused to allow his workforce to return, observing somewhat quaintly that they were `now strangers to him'.[70] A mass meeting of carters and drivers, at Cathedral Hall in Fitzroy, on 12 September, rejected the recommendation of the Defence Committee that food be declared `white'.[71] They asserted instead that they would support the wharfies and others by refusing to transport *any* goods handled by strikebreakers. The storemen and packers accepted the same recommendation but their employers rejected it, arguing that those dismissed would be allowed back only if they agreed to handle *all* goods.[72]

The Defence Committee publicly announced its determination for an immediate return to work by all strikers on 14 September. The members of the Manufacturing Grocer Employees Union responded immediately.[73] The problem for many unionists, either individually or as groups, was that they had no job to return to. A Mr. J. Harrison of J.B. Ellerker Pty Ltd, the main company supplying the ships that connected Melbourne with Tasmania, declared, for instance, his intention not to rehire any unionists.[74] His ships had been among the first to receive `volunteers', so he could afford to be belligerent.[75] Yet even those ship owners who were less well supplied with scabs were determined to give those they had preference over unionists. If and when either the seamen or

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[69] *Age,* 11 September 1917, p.5.
[70] *Age,* 12 September 1917, p.8.
[71] *Age,* 13 September 1917, p.7; *Argus*, 13 September 1917, p.7
[72] *Age,* 13 September 1917, p.7
[73] *Age,* 15 September 1917, p.13; *Argus*, 15 September 1917, p.19
[74] *Age,* 11 September 1917, p.5
[75] *Argus*, 22 August 1917, p.5

the wharfies returned to work, the decision would involve agreeing to work with scabs and to a considerable proportion of the strikers not being re-employed. This they were not yet willing to accept.

The employees at CSR were punished in another way by their management. The company maintained a Provident Fund towards which 2½% of their workers' wages was directed.[76] On 15 September, CSR Head Office telegrammed the Yarraville manager, instructing him not to negotiate with the union, which was anxious to negotiate a return to work.[77] The men nevertheless returned that day, only to be told that:

> 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.[78]

The management at Dunlop, was particularly intransigent. They were well provisioned with `volunteers'.[79] They may also have welcomed some of their original workforce (numbered at 1,250), back by 27 September when 1,104 strikers offered to return.[80] Geoffrey Blainey's history of the company refers to a `Share Purchase Association' set up to encourage employees to buy shares; it was to develop, during 1918, into a sort of de facto company union, with a membership of 638.[81] In any case,

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[76] NBA ANU, CSR papers, P10/75, Half Yearly report of the Colonial Sugar Refining Company, `Note for the Information of Shareholders', 30 September 1917. `Although ... all the members of the Provident Fund were given the opportunity to return to duty for a week after they struck, only a trifling percentage of these members availed themselves of the offer made.'

[77] NBA ANU, CSR papers, 142/204, Telegram, CSR Head Office to Manager Yarraville, 15 September 1917

[78] NBA ANU, CSR papers, 142/204, Letter from Frank Tudor MP to W.M. Hughes, 19 September 1917. Emphasis in original.

[79] *Age*, 8 October 1917, p.7, states that, by early October, there were 700 `volunteers' at Dunlop.

[80] *Age*, 27 September 1917, p.8

[81] Geoffrey Blainey, *Jumping Over The Wheel*, St Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 1993, p.97: `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

for the moment, Dunlop was only willing to accept fifty of the 1,104. Dunlop had been a patriotic employer, encouraging its workers to enlist and promising them jobs upon their return. A number of these returned servicemen were amongst those victimised. Most had been loyal employees of Dunlop (with up to fourteen years of pre-war service) who having enlisted with their employers' encouragement, had returned wounded to their old jobs (or to light duties amenable to their wounds).[82] By striking, they had provided Dunlop with the excuse to renege on its promise. For the employers, patriotism was proving to be a dispensable, as well as a last, resort.

A small measure of the bitterness engendered by Dunlop's attitude can be seen in the case of William Thomas Cullen, a Dunlop striker, related in the *Age* of 21 September.[83] He had been charged the day before with assaulting Edward Millekin, a strikebreaker, on 11 September, as Millekin made his way after work from the factory to Montague railway station. Apparently, Millekin had replied to Cullen's relatively mild abuse by shouting, `oh, go to the war'. Cullen had then flashed his returned services badge and punched Milliken, for which he was convicted on 20 September of assault.

The night of Cullen's trial saw revenge of a sort on Dunlop. For the night of 20 September was the night of broken glass, when Adela Pankhurst and Jenny Baines led an army of thousands of women from the working class suburbs of Richmond, Port Melbourne and South Melbourne in a rampage through streets blackened by the continuing shortage of coal. Along with the windows of butcher shops in Swan Street

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as the union to speak for the work-force, but was seen by the union as a gate-crasher, a mealy-mouthed upstart.'

[82] UMA, VTHC, EC Minutes, 29 October 1917, a deputation of returned soldiers, all of them victimised by Dunlop, related their stories to the Trades Hall Executive.

[83] *Age*, 21 September 1917 p.5. *Argus*, 20 September 1917, p.7

and the posh emporiums of Collins Street, the Dunlop factory in Montague had all its windows smashed.[84]

Another group of workers who faced a strike turned into a lockout were the timber workers. Almost every day throughout September they met in the Socialist Hall in Exhibition Street to discuss the question of how to return to work. They were not happy with the way the strike had been conducted. The *Age* of 18 September records a representative of the Defence Committee being `refused a hearing' at a timber workers' meeting the day before. The *Age* does not tell us what the precise nature of their discontent was.[85] Elsewhere, however, the *Age* was keen to pounce upon any instance of workers drawing conservative conclusions from the defeat that was now staring the movement in the face. One such example was when a meeting of the ASE branch at the Newport Railway Yards voted to congratulate itself on staying out of the strike and removed those of its officials `sympathetic with Direct Action' from office.[86]

This does not appear to have been the case with the timber workers. From 14 September, when the Timber Workers' Union announced its desire for a return to work, the Defence Committee was following a strategy of restricting the strike to the waterfront, the seamen and the coal miners.[87] The idea appears to have been that everyone else should return to work so that they might finance these key, strategically placed unions. It would therefore have been consistent with the behaviour of Defence Committee representatives at other meetings in September, if the speaker who was booed off the stage at the Socialist Hall had been arguing for a return to work. In any case, on 24 September, another

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[84] Smart `Feminists, Food and the Fair', p.122, Lockwood, *Ship to Shore*, p.178. Neither Lockwood nor Smart mention that Dunlop was on strike, let alone the hard line its management was taking. This means that their accounts lack a crucial motivation for the targetting of Dunlop.

[85] *Age*, 18 September 1917, p.5. *Argus*, 19 September 1917, actually retracts a previous report (after a request by the Defence Committee to do so) that `militants' had counted out EJ Holloway at that meeting

[86] *Age*, 17 September 1917, p.7

[87] *Argus*, 20 August 1917, p.7, provides the first reference to such a strategy. Both the *Age* and the *Argus* allude to it more frequently however after 14 September.

meeting of the timber workers rejected a deal their officials (with the Defence Committee's encouragement) had negotiated with their employers.[88] The problem was that the deal conceded to the employers the right to pick and choose whom they would accept back; it was in fact a complete capitulation. A substantial section at least of the Timber Workers therefore appeared to have concluded, not that the strike was a mistake, but that its leadership had been too timid.

Not all groups of workers were faced with such intransigence on the part of their employers. The Wonthaggi miners, unlike their NSW comrades, were free from scabs, and their management was happy to let them return on pre-strike conditions as early as 9 September.[89] The rope and cordage workers in Yarraville also returned on 20 September without any changes in conditions.[90] The carters and drivers, though faced with a range of individual victimisations, resumed `on the employers terms' on 28 September.[91] The strike, slowly but surely, was being reduced to a core of the wharfies, the seamen, Dunlop and the timber workers. The idea that these groups could hold out indefinitely with the support of the returned strikers and the rest of the movement was to prove false. The Manufacturing Grocers' Union, for instance, had struck a levy to support its relatively few victimised members. By 4 December the union, though it only had seven members left to support, was forced to abandon the levy due to member apathy.[92] Momentum, once lost (or deliberately curtailed) has a tendency to turn into its opposite.

On 21 September, the *Age* supplied its readers with a breakdown of `engagements' of `volunteers' by the Bureau since the beginning of its operations. It read as follows:

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[88] *Age*, 24 September 1917, p.7; *Argus*, 10 September 1917, p.8
[89] *Age*, 10 September 1917, p.6
[90] *Age*, 20 September 1917 p.7
[91] *Age*, 28 September 1917, p.7; *Argus*, 28 September 1917, p.7
[92] UMA, Manufacturing Grocers' Employees Federation of Australia, Vic. Branch papers, 1/1/4, Minutes, 4 December 1917

Wharf Laborers	-	2,831
Wheat Stackers	-	303
Drivers	-	511
Labourers	-	1,112
Seamen	-	253[93]

In order to underline that the decision of the rank and of the wharfies to hold out was pointless, Rupert Lockwood cites these figures to assert that their were 2,831 scabs on the waterfront. The same *Age* report, however, qualified these figures by pointing out that many `volunteers' `engaged' many times and that there were `never more than 1200' working on the waterfront at any one time. This was still a serious problem for the wharfies, but a third of the strikers being replaced by scabs is a lot better than 2,831 scabs to 3,000 strikers. More significantly, these figures emphasise where the problem of scabbing was most acute – on the waterfront.

Late September saw a split in the ranks of the wharfies, as the Port Philip Stevedores held a meeting which voted for a secret ballot of their members.[94] The newspapers are silent on the result, which probably means that the stevedores - who, in any case, were not to return till October - voted to stay out. As the stevedores included all the foremen on the waterfront, they represented a reservoir of skill that the employers could not easily replace. This gave them a bargaining power that could be used either to strengthen the strike, or to strike a separate deal for themselves. For the moment, the young militants within their ranks prevailed, and they held to the more honourable course.

By early October, the seamen found themselves faced with betrayal by their officials:

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[93] *Age*, 21 September 1917, p.5

[94] *Age*, 28 September 1917, p.7. The *Age's* report gives an incidental insight into the nature of the militant/moderate dichotomy when it mentions that there was a significant

> 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 anxious to continue to stand out in support of the wharf labourers.[95]

On 8 October the seamen in Sydney returned to work, leaving the Melbourne seamen even more isolated, and they voted to return also. That day the timber workers and the Dunlop strikers voted to end their strike on the employers' conditions, which meant a range of victimisations for the timber workers and unemployment for the vast bulk of the rubber workers (given that their were 700 `loyalists' already working at Dunlop).[96]

When the seamen reported for work on the morning of 9 October, given that the preference clause in their Award had not been cancelled, they all expected to be employed. But when the former crew of the steamer, *Oonah*, reported for duty, they found seventeen scab firemen already on board and seventeen of the former union crew were told they would not be rehired. Despite all they had suffered, including betrayal by their officials and desertion by the Sydney branch, this was too bitter a pill for the seamen to swallow. Their strike resumed.[97]

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minority within the Stevedores who opposed the proposal of the ballot as `scabbing'. The militants were described as `the younger section of the meeting'.

[95] *Age*, 3 October 1917, p.7

[96] *Age*, 8 October 1917, p.7; *Argus*, 8 October 1917, p.7; *The Timber Worker,* (Official organ of the Amalgamated Timber Workers Union, Victorian Branch), *12 October 1917,* p.2 claims however that only a minority of yards actually victimised anyone.

[97] Cahill & Fitzpatrick,. *The Seamen's Union of Australia.* p.46.

The return of the Port Phillip Stevedores, which the *Age* had trumpeted as imminent back in September, was finally accomplished in late October. They voted to return on 19 October[98], though it took more than a week for them to actually resume.[99] During that week, however, 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 October, the Wharf Labourers' Union decided to test the suggestion of Justice Higgins that they should simply report on-mass 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 unionists. 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.[100]

The day before this riot, the wharfies' last significant ally, the seamen, had finally capitulated. They had offered for work, and most had been accepted. They were, however, working with scabs: the *Oonah* was crewed with unionists working alongside the seventeen scab firemen.[101] Fitzpatrick and Cahill describe a report by the Melbourne Branch on the strike, produced in early 1918, which claimed that on 12 October a mass meeting in Sydney declared that if Victorian Branch wouldn't call off the strike, Sydney would `man all vessels from here'.[102] Such a betrayal appears strange, given the behaviour of the rank and file in Sydney in the strike's aftermath – namely, electing a revolutionary leadership and embarking in 1919 on a successful offensive strike. It is, however,

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[98] *Age*, 20 October 1917, p.11
[99] *Age*, 29 October 1917, p.8
[100] *Age*, 25 October 1917, p.5. *Argus*, 25 October 1917, p.5 described the incident as `union terrorism'
[101] *Age*, 24 October 1917, p.10. *Argus*, 24 October 1917, p.9
Cahill & Fitzpatrick,. *The Seamen's Union of Australia*, p.46.

consistent with the behaviour of the union's national leadership in Sydney.[103]

After the riot, 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'.[104] It was of course too late to do anything about the scabs. On 30 October, in far away Korumburra, the Jumbunna miners voted to resume. They had been kept on strike by the management's determination to victimise militants. Now the mine was to be opened by a face-saving deal that saw the victimised men's case shuffled off to a `judicial enquiry'.[105] (They would not actually resume work, however, till 13 November.[106]) The wharf labourers, staring down the scabs from their vacant lot, were now completely alone; the Sydney wharfies had returned on 21 October.[107] It was clear to everyone 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.[108] The `Great Strike' was over. The reasons for its defeat remained an issue of obvious contention. These, along with its significance and its impact upon the development of the labour movement, will be explored in Chapter Four.

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[103] It is possible that the Melbourne leadership was trying to save itself from a rank and file backlash by implicating the National leadership. In any case, they were to lose their positions as well in 1918 to Walsh's new team.
[104] *Age*, 26 October 1917, p.7
[105] *Age*, 30 October 1917, p.7. *Argus*, 20 October 1917, p.6
[106] *Age*, 14 November 1917, p.11. *Age*, 17 November 1917, p.13 reports that the victimised miners, not unsurprisingly, lost their case and were not re-employed.
[107] *Age*, 22 October 1917, p.8 - after submitting to a secret ballot.
[108] *Age*, 5 December, p.6

Chapter Four

`It is the men who are to blame, and not the Federation'.

They struck at the wrong time. Coal stocks were too high. They had no strategy to deal with the level of repression the strike provoked, with the use of the War Precautions Act, and, in particular, with mass scabbing. These are the familiar charges laid at the feet of the strikers in 1917. They are all true, at one level. Yet what is the point of such charges laid at the feet of rank and file workers? Berthold Brecht's short response to the 1953 workers' uprising in East Germany is apposite:

> After the uprising of June 17
> The Secretary of the Writers' Union
> Had leaflets distributed in the Stalinallee
> In which it was said that the people
> Had lost the government's confidence
> Which it would only be able to regain
> By redoubling its efforts. In that case, would it
> Not be simpler if the government dissolves the people
> And elected another?[1]

Whether the workers in the railway workshops had a choice in fighting the card system is not entirely clear. It is at least arguable that the threat to union organisation inherent in the new system, particularly the potential for the victimisation of militants, meant that they had to fight.[2] In any case, the workers' movement, as is the case with mass movements of all kinds, depends upon momentum; it cannot simply be turned off and

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[1] John Fuegi, *The Life and Lies of Berthold Brecht*, London: Flamingo, 1995, p.549

[2] *The Timber Worker*, 12 October 1917, p.1 made a similar point - taking issue with a Labor MP who had argued at the Yarra Bank that the strike was a lockout and that the workers should not have gone out unless they could have ensured a general stoppage: `Did he wish the workers to say to their bosses: "Hold on boss, we are not ready right now, let us work on till we can arrange for all to be locked out at the same time."'

on at will. Moreover, there is no guarantee that, given the build up of tensions on both sides of the class divide, another even greater provocation would not at some stage have led to the same response. In any case, the rank and file (for whom, like Brecht's `people', there is no replacement) decided to fight. It was then surely incumbent upon their officials to take the lead and to ensure that the strike was successful. This they signally failed to do. Nor was it simply a failure of imagination on their part, or a lack of strategy which was to blame - though both of these problems existed. At several critical points officials actively stood in the way of the strike's success. Kavanagh, the main leader in Sydney, revealed the key to the officials' attitude when he complained in his own autopsy of the dispute of the difficulty of `keeping the men in'.[3]

One of the obvious ways to deal with mass scabbing would have been to keep spreading the dispute as quickly and as widely as possible, thereby stretching the ability of the government to keep skeleton services running. Again and again, at key points of the strike, groups of workers - especially in Victoria - were restrained rather than encouraged to fight. We have seen, in Chapter Three, how the officials of the Victorian Railways Union leant upon a conservative element within the railways – the engine drivers (who were not even members of their own union) in order to keep the shunters at work. If they had instead encouraged the shunters, they might have used them as a base to spread the strike throughout the rest of the Victorian Railways.

Another example of this sort of bureaucratic constraint was when a mass meeting of the Victorian ASE met on 23 August. They were keen to strike, but, unlike similar groups of workers in NSW, they lacked the confidence to do so on their own, instead voting to ask permission from their Federal officials to hold a strike ballot. They dispatched a representative, W. P. Earsman (a future founder of the Communist Party),

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[3] *Age* 29, August 1917, p.7 cites unnamed Defence Committee members in Melbourne making an almost identical statement regarding the situation in Victoria.

to Sydney where he was firmly told that all that was required of the Victorian Branch was funds for strike support; permission was refused.[4] In his history of the ASE, Buckley argues that the NSW officials, as well as keeping their Victorian members at work, were conspicuous in their absence from most of the demonstrations and other activities that occurred in Sydney throughout August and September.[5] They may not have wanted the strike, but to `go missing' was an abdication of leadership.

Buckley gives some individual exceptions to this abdication of responsibility by the leaders of the union at the heart of the dispute, and we can add another. J. Gibson, one of the NSW officials of the ASE, joined A. C. Wharton from the NSW rail and tramways union (ARTSA) in addressing the mass meeting of 2,000 wharfies in Melbourne on 19 August. Together they gave what the *Age* described as `a colored description of Taylorism' which swayed what had been shaping as a `battle between moderates and militants' in favour of the latter.[6] Another example of an official acting to spread the strike was when A.J. Pearce, the President of Trades Hall, addressed the mass meeting of CSR workers at Yarraville Masonic Hall (also on 19 August) where the decision was made not to unload the sugar from the *Kadina*.[7]

These are the only instances in Victoria of officials encouraging rather than discouraging their members from striking - or at least the only ones that have been recorded. They were both astonishingly successful. If the *Age* report is reliable, it seems that the speeches by Wharton and Gibson turned around a meeting of wharfies where, initially, the moderates were predominant. The meeting of sugar workers addressed by Pearce voted unanimously not to unload the *Kadina*. If such an approach

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[4] K.P. Buckley, *The Amalgamated Engineers in Australia*. Canberra: Department of Economic History, ANU, 1970, pp.266-7. Buckley states they voted to strike. *Age*, 24 August 1917, p.5, states that they merely voted to request a ballot. It also makes the (persuasive) suggestion that one of the motivations for not spreading the strike was that an interstate strike would lead to a cancellation of the union's award.
[5] Buckley, *The Amalgamated Engineers in Australia,* p.266
[6] *Age*, 20 August 1917. p.7
[7] *Ibid.*

had been taken in the railways, the shunters may not have remained isolated. Instead, whilst simultaneously complaining of the backwardness of their members and the impossibility of industrial action on the railways, the officials of the VRU ignored (or actively restrained) the one element that wanted to fight. The common refrain, whether from the Federal ASE as it refused to give permission for its Victorian members to ballot for a strike, or from the secretary of the Manufacturing Grocers as he persuaded his members in Prowlings from joining the strike, was that an extension of the strike was against the wishes of the Defence Committee (in either its Sydney or its Melbourne incarnations).

The invocation of strategic wisdom implicit in this refrain is not convincing, however, for the simple reason that no strategy appears to have existed apart from an automatic reflex of moderation. Willis in Sydney, for instance, was quoted early in the strike as arguing that a general strike would be defeated in a week and that instead the Defence Committee would `call this union and that union out as the occasion demands'.[8] This might have impressed some of the crowd listening to him in the Domain. Unfortunately there is no record of either the Sydney or the Melbourne Committees calling a single union out. The later argument that the strike would be restricted to the mines and the waterfront, appears more like a strategic gloss laid over a defeat than a genuine strategy.

The heart of the strike in Victoria was the waterfront. At the meeting on 19th August, the local and Federal officials of the Waterside Workers appeared to favour strike action. At the least, they stood by while Gibson and Wharton persuaded their members to continue on strike. However, on 23 August, the National President of the Waterside Workers' Federation, Morris, was called before Justice Higgins, in a hearing initiated by the Commonwealth Steamship Company. Higgins threatened to remove preference from the Federation unless it returned to work immediately. The performance of Morris, who surely must have expected

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[8] *Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 August 1917, p.8

that, in the circumstances, even a liberal judge such as Higgins would take a hard line, was abject. The dialogue, quoted in the *Age*, is almost painful to read:

> 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.[9]

Higgins went on to demand that Morris immediately initiate meetings of his members and propose a return to work. Morris promised to do so.

The next day, 24 August, the federal Committee of Management (COM) of the Federation met in Melbourne, for the first time since the beginning of the strike in Sydney three weeks previously. The minutes reveal Morris's determination to engineer a return to work, particularly at Port Pirie (the most strategically important waterfront, as it was from here that minerals important to the war effort were loaded from Broken Hill and transshipped to Europe).[10] Later that week, a large mass meeting of Melbourne wharfies overturned Morris's efforts to engineer a ballot for a return to work (though the Port Pirie branch returned, to Billy Hughes' publicly announced satisfaction).[11] Morris then defied the wishes of the Melbourne rank and file by continuing to push for a ballot.

The COM continued to meet regularly throughout September and October, usually on a fortnightly, or even a weekly, basis.[12] In between meetings, Morris telegraphed the branches throughout the country urging a

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[9] *Age*, 24 August 1917, p.6
[10] ANU, NBA, WatersideWorkers' Federation [henceforth WWF] papers, T62/1/1, Federal Committee of Management [henceforth COM] Minutes, 24 August 1917
[11] *Age*, 27 August 1917, p.6

change of rules which Higgins had suggested as a sufficient criterion to avoid loss of preference.[13] What Higgins wanted was for the various branches of the union to cede to the federal COM their right to call strikes. They would also have the right to expel any member of the union who struck without their permission.[14] Clearly Higgins preferred to deal with the likes of Morris rather than with the turbulent men in the branches.

We have then a record of two months of efforts to end the strike, and failing that, to give the union a more bureaucratic structure in order to accommodate Higgins. Before the hearing of 23 August the COM did not meet, nor is there any correspondence on file, to or from the COM. From when the strike began until they had decided to retreat, the federal leadership of the Waterside Workers' Union apparently had nothing to discuss and nothing to add to the development and continuance of the strike. If they supported the strike before then, they clearly did so with a passivity that was almost as damaging as their later efforts to end it. Once they had been instructed by Higgins to ensure a return to work, the picture painted by the records is, in contrast, one of frantic energy. It was energy devoted towards ending the strike at all costs. The irony of the whole story was that Hughes eventually bypassed Higgins by removing preference from the union at the various state levels.[15] All the attempts to retreat and compromise had come to nothing.

The officials of the Seamen's Union are another group with distinctly low profile during the strike. The federal officials in Sydney were apparently invisible, not simply to the press and to their rank and file, but also to their fellow officials in Victoria. The Victorian officials

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[12] ANU, NBA, WWF COM, T62/1/1, Minutes, 24 August – 11 October 1917
[13] ANU, NBA, WWF papers, 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
[14] Beasley, *Wharfies,* p.52
[15] Turner, *Industrial Labour and Politics*, p.157. Lockwood, *Ship to Shore*, pp.165-6 `On 9 September, preference to WWF members under Higgins' 1915 award was cancelled in the ports of Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane, Bowen, Mackay, Newcastle and Fremantle under the War Precautions Act regulations.'

are cited in the *Age* of 14 August complaining that they had `received no instructions from Sydney', and used this as an excuse not to endorse strike action.[16] They repeated the complaint about Sydney keeping them in the dark in a report on the strike produced by the Victorian Branch in 1918.[17] Turner states that the Federal Executive of the union called the seamen out on 11 August.[18] His claim is, however, not documented. Moreover, both the *Age* and Cahill and Fitzpatrick describe the strike decision in Sydney as being made at a meeting, on 11 August, of 200-250 seamen against the advice of their officials who deemed it unconstitutional'.[19]

The Seamen's Union officials were a particularly conservative lot. Their journal, for instance, published in January 1917, as the IWW Twelve languished in gaol, carried an article on the IWW, the venom of which exceeded even that of the conservative press. It describes the IWW as `made up of the scum and tailings that have been spued [sic] out of the Labor movement'.[20] These officials were also one of the main victims of the rank and file backlash which followed the strike, losing control of the union at both federal and state levels to a team led by the proto-communist (and partner of Adela Pankhurst), Tom Walsh, in 1918.[21] Clearly their rank and file were not impressed with their performance during the strike.

The most difficult thing to assess regarding the mass strike of 1917 is in many ways the most important: what exactly motivated the rank and file workers to such an extraordinary display of militancy and independence? The chorus was active, and loud enough - `shrieking' and `hooting' to the discomfort of the *Age*. What the chorus had to say, however, was always less likely to be recorded than the various pronouncements of official labour. We are left for the most part with surmise and conjecture based upon its actions. The very fact that so many

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[16] *Age*, 14 August 1917, p.6
[17] Cahill & Fitzpatrick,. *The Seamen's Union of Australia.* p.44
[18] Turner, *Industrial Labour & Politics*, p.149
[19] Cahill & Fitzpatrick, *The Seamen's Union of Australia.* P.43; *Age*, 14 August 1917, p.6
[20] UMA, Seamen's Union papers, *The Australasian Seamen's Journal*, 1 January 1917
[21] Turner, *Industrial Labour and Politics*, p.195

were willing to walk out, workplace by workplace, indicates a high level of both anger and enthusiasm – a belief that here, at last, was the chance for a great, class-wide confrontation with the employers. We have already noted, in Chapter Two, the growth of the far left in the period leading up to the strike. Its performance during the strike provides some clues to the extent of the radicalisation which accompanied it.

Unfortunately, in the case of the IWW in NSW, the strike came several months too late. The organisation had been formally banned earlier in the year. It had been the subject of full-scale repression for many months, and due to its long-standing policy of meeting repression with open defiance – of packing the gaols – there was little of the organisation left by the time of the strike.[22] Indeed the last great show trial of its members occurred in Sydney on 31 August, at the high point of the strike.[23] A ghost of the `wobblies' influence can be discerned in the *Sydney Morning Herald's* report that the mass demonstrations sang the IWW anthem, `Solidarity For Ever'.[24] More fundamentally, three years of dissemination of the doctrine of the `One Big Union' and the `Scientific General Strike' arguably assisted significantly in the preparation for the mass walkout that took place.[25] The VSP itself made a claim for the influence of one of its members when its organ argued that the Melbourne wharfies had been largely inspired to ban the export of wheat by the efforts of Adela Pankhurst.[26]

It is possible to discern a difference between the culture of the left in Melbourne and Sydney, which appears to have been reflected in the different behaviour of the workers in the two cities. In Sydney, the main far-left current was syndicalist; in Melbourne, it was a political current, based primarily around the Victorian Socialist Party (VSP), with a

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[22] P.J. Rushton, 'The Revolutionary Ideology of the Industrial Workers of the World in Australia', *Historical Studies*, vol. 15, October 1972, pp.424-446
[23] Turner, Ian, *Sydney's Burning*, pp.86-9
[24] *Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 August 1917, p.8
[25] Childe, *How Labour Governs*, p.151, described the strike as being `partly inspired' by the IWW, an organisation to which he was sympathetic but not uncritical.

tradition of propaganda and street agitation (as well as work within the ALP) rather than of work within the unions. Individual VSP members were active in the unions. John Curtin, for instance, was Secretary of the Timberworkers' Union from 1911 to 1915, and though he was already resident in Western Australia at the time of the strike, his old union still held their meetings at the VSP's Socialist Hall in Exhibition Street.[27] But there is nothing in the party's collective intervention to match the agitational activity of the IWW in Sydney, holding, for instance, lunchtime meetings at the Randwick workshops.[28] In, any case, the VSP's approach to the ALP was mirrored in their approach to the union leadership – as a loyal but radical ginger group rather than as a defiant opposition.[29] As a result of this, the rank and file in Sydney exhibited a greater level of defiance and opposition and were far more willing to act independently of their officials. In Melbourne, radical defiance was more likely to be found amongst the working class women who followed Adela Pankhurst, storming parliament and smashing shop windows.

But there were some advantages to the traditions of the Melbourne left. In January 1917, Adela Pankhurst had left Vida Goldstein's Women's Political Association (WPA) to join the VSP.[30] She did so because she felt that class rather than gender was now the most important division in society. Given the trajectory of the WPA later that year, she perhaps need not have resigned. It was in the WPA's headquarters at the Guild Hall in Swanston Street (now Storey Hall in RMIT) that the decisive meeting of the wharfies was held on 19 August. Later, the basement of

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[26] *The Socialist*, 17 August 1917, p.4
[27] Lloyd Ross, *John Curtin: A biography*, Melbourne: M.U.P., 1996, pp.30-37
[28] Burgmann, *Revolutionary Industrial Unionism*, p. 174
[29] This is not to suggest that VSP members were immune to the syndicalist bug, despite the organisation's orthodox socialism and willingness to work inside the ALP. A VSP member, writing for an interstate newspaper, wrote in praise of the 1917 strike (just after its defeat): `The truth is that the only thing the plutocracy really fear is the well-organised army of Labor. Political campaigns come and go.' It would seem that John Curtin learned a somewhat different lesson from the strike than that famously learned by the victimised engineer Ben Chifley. See Lloyd Ross, *John Curtin*, p.60
[30] Bomford, *That Dangerous and Persuasive Woman,* p.170.

the same building was turned into a food cooperative to aid the strikers. 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.[31] The funds were largely solicited from suburban Political Labor Councils.[32]

Such a level of organised strike support prefigures the Wonthaggi strike of 1934 under communist leadership.[33] It may help explain why the Melbourne seamen, in particular, were able to hold out longer than anyone else. The Melbourne Wharf Labourers made a point, during the Eight Hour parade in March 1918, of leaving the procession as a body, marching to the Guild Hall and saluting the WPA.[34] Apart from being a poignant gesture, this gives some indication of the extent to which they maintained their cohesion – their sense as a collective. It was not the behaviour of men who had been utterly defeated.

Not utterly – but defeated they were. And the point raised by Vere Gordon Childe, back in the 1920s, remains to be answered. Was this the wrong time to strike and could they have won? If it were an inopportune time to strike, a union leadership with credibility amongst the militants in the rank and file may have been able to restrain them. The capacity of an industrial organisation to retreat is intimately connected with its capacity to advance. Discipline and *esprit de coeur* cannot be expected from a rank and file whose leaders negotiate secretly behind their backs or engage in other bureaucratic manouevres, such as attempting to organise ballots against the express wishes of the membership. A more credible leadership would have been able to retreat because, like the communist leaders of the

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

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

[33] See Peter Cochrane, `Wonthaggi coal strike of 1934', in Judy Mackinolty (ed.) *The Wasted Years?* Sydney: George Allen & Unwin, 1981, pp.42-57

[34] Bomford, *That Dangerous and Persuasive Woman,* p.170.

coal miners who waited from 1934 (when they won control of the union) till 1939 before they went on the offensive, they would have gained the confidence of the rank and file that they *would* eventually fight.[35] Yet even such a leadership (and none such existed in 1917) may not have been able to restrain the rank and file. Clearly then they would have had to make the best of a difficult situation, to make the strike as effective as possible.

One of the answers would have been to spread the strike as widely and as rapidly as possible – to lead rather than restrain, to mobilise rather than to demobilise. Most importantly, strategy and tactics were needed to deal with the mass scabbing. Despite the scale of their mobilisation, the State and Federal Governments were not as successful as they have often been portrayed in replacing the strikers. Their total efforts provided 170,000 days of `volunteer' labour, completely dwarfed by the three million plus strike days which were lost.[36] It can only have been enough to provide the most meagre of skeleton services. These figures demonstrate that the mass strikebreaking exercise through the use of scabs was more vulnerable than is usually acknowledged. We know what the Defence Committees in Sydney and Melbourne did *not* want to do about the strikebreakers. They did *not* want confrontation. They did *not* want violence. They ignored the scabs, and the strike was lost.

In Broken Hill, a more militant tradition met the mere rumour of scabs, triggered by the arrival of a special police escort, with a riot. Turner and others have described how police were sent from Adelaide, were met on the streets and responded with a baton charge and a number of arrests. What has less often been described is the astonishing sequel to the riot, as described in vivid detail by an *Age* reporter. After the baton charges and arrests, Angus, the President of the AMA, addressed the scattered groups of men who were still on the streets of Broken Hill (some

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[35] Stuart Macintyre, *The Reds: The Communist Party of Australia from origins to illegality*, Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1998, pp. 336-8

350-400 had been involved in the riot). He called for order and asked them to attend an emergency meeting. From the meeting a mass picket descended on the mine. It must have seriously outnumbered the police, because they apparently stood by as the picketers swarmed over the mine and surrounded the handful of engineers who were working there. One was, in the *Age*'s words, `taken prisoner' until, `somewhat overcome' he was eventually driven home by the President in a motor car.[37]

The raid was an exercise in a different sort of frustration to that which would later lead to violence between the wharfies and scabs in Melbourne. Despite the strategic importance of its minerals, the government never even considered sending `volunteers' to Broken Hill. Unable to make the rest of the strike as secure from scabbing, the militants wreaked their vengeance on a harmless engineer who was only engaged in the usual exercise of pumping water from the mine. A number were to pay for this adventure with gaol sentences. Another, more sensible, example of Broken Hill militancy was the application of bans on the police from Adelaide. Night-soil carters refused to service the hotels where the police were lodged.[38] General Stink prevailed where General Riot had failed; the police returned to Adelaide.[39]

In large cities such as Sydney and Melbourne it would have been more difficult to impose such a solution. In Sydney, the scabs were concentrated in three camps. They were recruited at one place in Melbourne – the Atheneum theatre. A mass movement can be very creative when imagination is given a free hand, as those who witnessed picketers welding train tracks together at the mass pickets on the Melbourne waterfront in 1998 will testify. Unfortunately, outside of

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[36] Turner, *Industrial Labour and Politics*, p.152

[37] *Age*, 24 August 1917, p.7. Another good account is in Ern Wetherell, *Industrial History of the Stormy Years 1910-1921*, (Manuscript held in the Broken Hill Library) – my thanks to Mick Armstrong for alerting me to this reference.

[38] *Age*, 28 August 1917, p.5. The Butchers Union also refused to supply them with meat.

[39] George Dale, *The Industrial History of Broken Hill*, Adelaide: Libraries Board of South Australia, 1976, p.238

Broken Hill, the official approach in 1917 was to stifle that creativity and to channel it away from confrontation into ritual and ineffective activity.

This returns us to the question posed in Chapter One about the difference between the phenomenon of the mass strike, as described by Rosa Luxemburg, and the bureaucratic mass strike, as described by Tony Cliff. The mass strike that swept the eastern states of Australia in 1917 can be seen to have aspects in common with both. Its spontaneous, elemental nature is evident in the way it began and in the way it spread (especially in NSW). Once they were on strike, however, the workers turned to their unions for leadership.

George Crossman, the Federal Secretary of the Locomotive Enginemen's Association, 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:

> One very unfortunate circumstance, [the fact that] the greater portion of the Strike Executive was composed of the paid officials of unions'.[40]

He was clearly making a populist point for the benefit of his more conservative members that officials who have no wages to lose can find it easy to remain on strike. It is a nonsensical argument – that a rank and file revolt would have been restrained if it had been run by the rank and file. It does, however, confirm that the Defence Committees in Melbourne and Sydney were made up mostly of paid officials rather than delegates from the rank and file. Crossman's concerns are mirrored in the comments made by a leading activist in the IWW, Ted Moyle, in private notebooks during the strike. Moyle applauded the fact that the strikes were started by

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[40] 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

`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'.[41]

Moyle had a better idea of what was happening in the strike than Crossman. Having passed into the hands of the trade union bureaucracy the strike was stifled. The bureaucrats, at their best, were capable of mobilising impressive demonstrations; they knew how to protest. They knew even better how to negotiate, and insisted on doing so, in secret, even when it was clear that the Government was determined not to compromise. They had no idea how to fight, and no strategy to win, fearing confrontation and regretting the strike's existence, they actually sabotaged its extension.

Here, there was a failure of the rank and file – not the fact of its revolt, but its limitation. Burdened with inadequate officials, they were not able, as the Clyde Workers' Committee had in 1915, to construct a body of rank and file delegates to run the strike themselves. Some of them did, however, learn well the lesson about the deficiencies of their leaders. In the aftermath of the strike, particularly in NSW, there was a decisive shift to the left in the leadership of the trade union movement. It was symbolised by the victory of Tom Walsh in the Seamen and by the replacement of Kavanagh at the head of the Trades and Labour Council by Jock Garden.[42] Garden was the leader of a group of officials which was to become known as 'The Trades Hall Reds', and who would go on to help found the Australian Communist Party.[43]

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[41] Ted Moyle, Notebook No. 2, cited in Burgmann, *Revolutionary Industrial Unionism*, p.175

[42] Arthur Hoyle, *Jock Garden: The Red Parson*, Sydney: Arthur Hoyle, 1993, pp. 8-9, Garden had been an activist in the Clerk's Union who, after being sacked from his job in the Defence Department's Ordinance store (for theft), had landed a minor position at Trades Hall. Despite his dubious background, his victory clearly represented a dramatic left-wing shift in union politics.

[43] Miriam Dixson, *Greater Than Lenin? Lang and Labor 1916-1932*, Melbourne: Melbourne Politics Monographs, 1977, pp.55-64, makes clear that while the victory of the Trades Hall Reds was most clearly symbolised in the electoral coups of Walsh and Garden, supporting them was `a network of informal, rank and file red union cells'.

More importantly, as the economy boomed in the immediate aftermath of the war, the union movement not only recovered its strength but went on the offensive. Much attention has been devoted to the negative consequences of the defeat in 1917; and these consequences are undeniable. There were scab unions established: on the NSW railways, on the waterfronts of Sydney and Melbourne, and at Dunlop. What is rarely commented on is the speed with which the movement as a whole, if not in all of these individual workplaces, recovered from the setback. 1919 saw (proportionate to the population) the largest number of strike days lost in Australia's history. The strikes, moreover, were overwhelmingly offensive and victorious, even though, in NSW especially, they were sometimes led by unions that were still officially deregistered. The most dramatic were the strikes of the seamen and the Broken Hill miners who were both on strike for much of the year. In Broken Hill they won the 35-hour week, a remarkable achievement at a time when most workers throughout the world were only beginning to demand the eight-hour day (with a six-day week).[44]

A contrast between the fortunes of the seamen and the wharfies during that year is revealing. Rupert Lockwood, in *Ship to Shore*, reveals his admiration for Morris as a leader with such remarks as: `time and again his cautionary advice was proved right' or,

> Joe Morris had been telling them for weeks. There wasn't a hope of winning the strike with volunteers to spare ... Through the bleak month of October the rank and file rejected his advice: their

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[44] Brian Kennedy, *Silver, Sin and Sixpenny Ale: A Social History of Broken Hill 1883-1921*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1978, pp. 158-174. See also Geoffrey Blainey, *The Rise of Broken Hill*, Melbourne: McMillan, 1968, pp.140-144, and Bob Bottom, *Behind the Barrier*, Sydney: Gareth Powell Associates, 1969, p.8. Turner, *Industrial Labour and Politics,* pp.197-9, astonishingly avoids mentioning this victory in his description of the 1919-20 strike arguing that `there was little to show' for the hardships endured during the dispute.

> judgement had become as blinkered as their fighting spirit was redoubtable.[45]

Lockwood's admiration for Morris is as misplaced as his condescension towards the rank and file is annoying. Morris was to remain at the helm until 1928, just before his members were plunged into an even more disastrous lockout.[46] In 1919, he continued to restrain the rank and file, though there was an unsuccessful strike in Melbourne in August of that year to try and get rid of the hated `Bureau' and its scabs, as well as an infamous riot on the Fremantle docks.[47] The union battled throughout the 1920s with scab unions, gaining some success as the decade progressed, but never entirely destroying the rival organisations (which would rise again during the lockout of 1928-30). The seamen in 1919 discarded their officials and replaced them with a team led by the mercurial Tom Walsh.[48] In 1919 he led them in a strike which lasted from May to August, winning a remarkable 35 shillings a-week pay rise and dramatic improvements in conditions.[49]

Just as there are Pyrrhic victories, sometimes there are defeats from which valuable lessons can be learned and by which future victories are made possible. For crucial sections of the working class in Eastern Australia, the mass strike of 1917 was clearly just such a defeat. How they reacted to the defeat depended on their experience during the strike: the extent to which they were active and organised, and (as the contrast between the wharfies and the seamen shows) the extent to which an alternative leadership crystallised out of that experience. They were right

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[45] Lockwood, *Ship to Shore*, p.167
[46] Lockwood, *Ship to Shore*, p.234
[47] Lockwood, *Ship to Shore*, pp. 188-93, Beasley, *Wharfies*, pp.53-8
[48] It is interesting to speculate about the role Walsh, then a rank and file seaman, played in the Melbourne strike. *The Socialist*, 14 September 1917, p.3, reveals that at one point of the strike, Walsh (a VSP member) was addressing meetings in Wonthaggi on `The Coming Revolution'.
[49] Cahill and Fitzpatrick, *The Seamen's Union*, p.51, also notes that seamen's wages continued to rise up until the defeat in 1925 while British seamen over the same period, under a notoriously right-wing leadership, saw their real wages *halved.*

to strike, and, though they had neither the organisation nor the politics to win, it is not `the men' who were to blame for the defeat, but their leaders.

Conclusion

In 1906, Rosa Luxemburg contrasted the spontaneous energy of the Russian working class with the bureaucracy and passivity of the German labour movement. Antonio Gramsci, a decade and a half later, described the debilitating conservatism and bureaucracy of union leaders, amidst the revolutionary enthusiasm of Turin during the *Bienno Rosso*. In the 1950s Tony Cliff drew these threads together into an analysis of the trade union bureaucracy which identified it as a crucial mainstay of reformism – of class peace. In the 1980s, as the British miners returned, defeated, to their doomed pits, he extended this analysis with the concept of the `bureaucratic mass strike'.

The strike which gripped eastern Australia in late 1917 is more accurately described, after Luxemburg, as a `mass strike' than as a `general strike'. At no time did anybody, officially or unofficially, attempt to call out the whole working class. Indeed, few of the workers involved were called out at all; they struck on their own initiative. They shared the enthusiasm of the Russian workers described by Luxemburg and, especially in NSW, they were influenced, as the Russians clearly had been, by the dissemination of revolutionary doctrines. It was not the revolutionary Marxism of the Bolsheviks, however, that inspired them. It was instead the syndicalist doctrines of solidarity and direct action that helped turn discontent into revolt.

In Melbourne, the same discontent, but different political traditions, combined to inspire a revolt that moved along fracture lines determined by a more traditional definition of solidarity – the straightforward refusal to `scab' or to work with `scabs'.

In both cases, the revolt went only half way. The rank and file decided to strike, but once on strike, they placed the organisation of their revolt in the hands of officials who, for the most part, considered the

whole adventure a mistake. Bureaucracy could not halt the strike, but it could stifle it.

On the spectrum, then, between Luxemburg's ideal and Cliff's bureaucratic opposite, the mass strike of 1917 takes an intermediate position. It was an expression of spontaneous enthusiasm. The rank and file had sufficient taste of their own power for crucial groups, such as the seamen and the miners in Broken Hill, to learn positive lessons from their defeat. But that defeat itself is testimony to the fact that union bureaucracy laid its dead hand on the dispute and ensured its failure as the employing class mobilised, undivided and determined, to defeat it. In that sense, it was also a `bureaucratic mass strike'.

`Taylorism', against which they revolted, may be an anachronistic doctrine, but the imperatives of capital are with us today. Speed ups, casualisation, and the great god of `efficiency' are, if anything, more in evidence today than they were in 1917. For a brief historical moment the chorus became active and sang in full throat. It is a matter of more than academic concern whether it will sing again.

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