

## Commemorating the Greatest Industrial Upheaval in Australian History<sup>i</sup>

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One hundred years ago, Australia experienced what became known variously as the NSW General Strike or 'Great Strike'. Officially the strike began on 2 August, when 5,780 of the workers employed at the Randwick Tramway and Eveleigh Railway workshops refused to work with a new card-system of recording working times and performance. By the end of the week this number had grown to 10,000 as other workers joined the struggle against the system that allegedly aimed to improve 'efficiency'. By the end of the strike's second week the number of workers reached 30,000 and two weeks later still the number had reached nearly 50,000. Mainly as a result of black bans and other sympathetic action the dispute extended beyond Sydney and the rail and tram workshops to the industrial centres of Bathurst, Broken Hill, Bulli-Wollongong, Goulburn, Lithgow, Newcastle, and from there to Victoria. Included among the strikers were carters, trolley and draymen, coal lumpers, coalminers, firemen, gas workers, ironworkers, seamen, slaughtermen and butchers, wharf-labourers, and women workers from the railway refreshment rooms and CSR in Pyrmont. The strike lasted in the NSW railways and tramways until 9 September and continued in other sectors until late October by which time approximately 97,500 workers had become involved. Of these, about 77,350 were located in N.S.W. and around 14,000 had been affected in Victoria, according to Fahey and Lack (2014).

Working class community hostility to the NSW Government's support for the card-system also produced mass protest. Union and community meetings, processions and demonstrations brought hundreds of thousands of non-striking men, women and children into the fray. From 6 August, daily processions and demonstrations in support of the strikers occurred in Sydney suburbs of Alexandria, Balmain, Botany, Glebe, Kings Cross, Marrickville, Paddington, Newtown, Redfern, Surry Hills and Rockdale, and throughout NSW in Bathurst, Bellingen, Broken Hill, Lismore, Lithgow, Mudgee, Newcastle and Orange. In Sydney, groups gathered in their neighborhoods, and proceeded to the Central Railway Station at Eddy Avenue and then on to the Sydney Domain. On many occasions the crowds were estimated to be between 80,000 and 150,000. Mass meetings were also held at Trades Hall, the Sydney Town Hall, as well as in halls in suburbs and in country towns.

The impact of this dispute on the lives of thousands upon thousands of individuals and their families, on Australian trade unions and the Australian Labor Party, as well as many communities, suburbs and towns was immense and long-lasting. In part this was the result of the NSW Government's use of draconian measures, which included the enlistment of strike-breakers initially from Sydney Grammar School and Sydney University and later from rural areas with the aid of the conservative Farmers & Settlers Association and Primary Producers Union. The Government passed the *Coal Mining Regulation Amendment Act* to allow strike-breakers into the mines and commandeered cars and trucks, coal and other resources. It refused to negotiate with the strikers' representatives and instructed benevolent societies not to provide relief to the strikers' families. Police surveillance was undertaken of communication in and out of Trades Hall and at the Sydney Domain.

Over two thousand of the striking railway and tramway workers who were dismissed on 14 August were not re-employed, unionists and officials were blacklisted, and those who regained their jobs, lost their seniority and other accumulated benefits, including superannuation. A similar fate was experienced by strikers from a wide range of other occupations in the maritime and mining industries, among others. In total, 22 trade unions were deregistered for their participation in the Strike, and a number of Labor Members of

Parliament, union officials and workers were arrested on a range of charges, including conspiracy.

### **Commemorating Defeat?**

Why should we commemorate such a colossal failure? As most of us would admit, Australians have never shied away from recognising the importance of defeat. At annual ANZAC Day events we remember the tragic Gallipoli campaign and the volunteers who showed courage and perseverance in the belief that they were fighting for a just and principled cause. In a similar vein, it is vital for us to commemorate those who fought for a just and principled cause in relation to workplace rights, fair working conditions and justice in employment and who suffered immensely for their struggles. Through our remembrance we, too, stand up, not only in support of their efforts, courage and perseverance, but as significantly for those same rights and conditions today. However, it is also important to appreciate two additional aspects of this dispute as relevant to us today.

First, we need to acknowledge the significance of government action in creating and/or supporting conditions that violate people's rights and freedoms in both the industrial and political spheres. Second, and relatedly we need to acknowledge people's right to mobilise collectively to protect and promote their rights and freedoms. The 1917 Strike throws up salient lessons in relation to both but to appreciate these lessons we need to be aware of (i) a number of contextual aspects; (ii) the cause of the strike; and (iii) the longer-term outcomes of the strike. In short, we need to understand what was at stake for workers and their representatives, families and supporters.

#### **(i) Context**

One hundred years ago, life was turbulent for most Australians. The stress of World War One increased anxieties, while the Federal *War Precautions Act* restricted freedoms at home. The War increased the costs of goods and services, as well as the number of people unemployed and underemployed. To rein in costs, a wage freeze was imposed in late 1914 and increasing numbers of employers and conservative politicians began promoting a national efficiency campaign and advocating management methods that they believed would increase production and productivity. Price inflation, increasing rent costs, lower wages and job losses worsened existing inequalities. Workers responded to the mounting threats to their livelihoods, their working conditions and pay with increased strike action. For many employers and political conservatives, the blame for the escalating industrial militancy could easily be attributed to the growing support for the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), an organisation that was established in Chicago in 1905 and which spread to Australia in 1911. The IWW promoted the concept of 'One Big Union', solidarity and direct action, and it actively opposed the war and conscription in Australia. Its slogan of 'slow work means more jobs' resonated for workers facing demands for increased efficiency from Australian employers and managers who were particularly vocal in their support for 'scientific management', a system developed by F.W. Taylor in the USA. Taylor's system, with its time and motion studies and 'speed-up' methods, increased surveillance over work and gave rise to industrial action wherever it was introduced. Taylor was vocally opposed to workers' ability to organise collectively to limit their output and trade unions.

The Federal Government's promotion of compulsory conscription for overseas service created further divisions. An Anti-Conscription campaign was launched on 23 September 1916 with a large demonstration in Sydney and on the following day Police raided IWW headquarters in Sussex Street. Twelve IWW members were arrested, charged with treason and later convicted under the *War Precautions Act*, on spurious evidence. This coercive action by the Government raised immense concerns for many working people,

including those not particularly supportive of the IWW. Their growing opposition contributed to a massive campaign against the first conscription referendum in October 1916, which was defeated. Both led to a split in the Labor Party. Those expelled from the Party, such as Prime Minister (PM) William Hughes, the NSW Premier William Holman and the NSW Minister for Labour and Industry G.S. Beeby, formed coalitions with conservative politicians in both the NSW and Federal Parliaments under the umbrella of the newly formed Nationalist Party. The first State and Federal Labor Governments, both elected in 1910, lost the ensuing elections on 24 March 1917 in NSW and on 5 May federally. According to D.J. Murphy (1983), shipping companies, mine owners, manufacturers, pastoralists and newspaper proprietors began to urge these new governments to 'take the unions on'.

These political developments reinforced workers' distrust of the newly elected conservative coalition governments; distrust that escalated further in July 1917, when the Labor 'Rat', Prime Minister Hughes, pushed through an amendment to the *Federal Unlawful Associations Act*, originally passed in December 1916, with the aim of destroying the IWW completely. Such actions foreshadowed the extremes to which conservatives would resort to undermine the political and industrial rights of working people.

## **(ii) Causes**

The immediate cause of the strike was the card-system introduced into the rail and tram workshops on 20 July 1917. For workers this was a form of scientific management which threatened them with increased workplace surveillance, work intensification, employment insecurity and most significantly their collective capacity to maintain a 'fair day's work for a fair day's pay'. As the Strike Defence Committee's Manifesto, published in the *Daily Telegraph* on 13 August put it, the card system was a way of '*speeding up ... the workman to his utmost capacity, and of pitting him against his fellows, and against himself – a system which aims to ... make him a machine in the crudest sense of the word. It means slavery!*'. The *SMH*, *Daily Telegraph* and the *Australian Worker* papers repeatedly reported that speakers at public meetings and demonstrations stressed that the upheaval was based upon a concerted effort by the 'Capitalists and the Government to smash trade unionism and institutionalise a 'machine slave system'.

The strike's spread to workers not directly affected by the card-system was based on two other factors. The first was the principle of collectivism to which many working people adhered. As Jack Lang MP stressed in Parliament, this was something more than 'a mere idle strike' as sacrifices would not be made by the employees of the state's transport services 'unless some great principle' was at stake. At the heart of this principle was the traditional workers' right to collective union representation in negotiations over the conditions of employment and pay. For the workers, this principle was essential for the defence of their shared interests. It relied on solidarity and it was enacted through the 'Black' doctrine, which involved bans on work done by strike-breakers. The imposition of the doctrine by the Strike Defence Committee on 6 August resulted in a rapid escalation of the strike to the coal mines and the waterfront. As the Secretary of the Moulders' Union explained in the *SMH* on 4 August: 'Our men are out simply on a matter of union principle ... If our men could have remained at work without infringing on the work of other men, they would have done so'. Similarly, on 23 August the *Daily Telegraph* reported that the NSW Branch of the Federated Bricklayers Union was 'in full sympathy with our fellow unionists who are out on strike on a principle'. As Coward (1973: 90) points out, by October, the wharf labourers who had 'stood by' their 'fellow-unionists', on 'a matter of principle,' had been thwarted by strike-breaking-labour.

The second factor was the NSW Government's support for the card-system, its unwillingness to negotiate with labour movement organisations or entertain the unions' request for an independent inquiry into the system. The partisanship with employers reflected by such actions increased working people's frustrations with the economic conditions and lack of trust in the Government. The importance people placed on the impartiality and independence of Government, the courts and judges was evident in the requests for an independent inquiry to avert the strike in late July and in the resolution that was repeatedly carried throughout NSW during the strike, which stated: 'This public meeting of citizens, comprising all shades of political opinion, urges the Government to at once appoint an Independent Tribunal' into the dispute.

The Government's unwillingness to entertain these requests and negotiate over the card-system was perceived as a threat to the improvements in conditions and wages that had been hard won during preceding decades through the conciliation and arbitration system in which courts and judges ostensibly worked to balance the interests of workers and employers or managers in the public interest. As Labor PM, Andrew Fisher had put it in his election speech in 1914 'we look upon arbitration as a civilised system of obtaining justice between all citizens with the minimum disturbance of industrial relationship and the minimum of distress.... We desire therefore, the widest possible opportunity to be afforded to all workers and employers to approach the Arbitration Court'. However, in this dispute the strikers were not given recourse to the Arbitration Court because the card-system was deemed by Justice Heydon to constitute 'a mere detail of workshop management' rather than a 'change of working conditions'. As a result, it could not come within the purview of the Court. In fact, according to V.G. Childe (1923), the Minister for Labour had the power under the *Arbitration Act* to call a compulsory conference of the unions and the Commissioners, as had occurred previously, but the Minister chose not to do so. Later, on 23 August, Heydon justified the deregistration of unions in the Industrial Court stating: 'Their proper course was to come to the Court. If the card system comes within the jurisdiction of the Court, the Court could have considered it'. This profoundly contradicted his own earlier ruling that the card-system did not come within the purview of the Court.

In the event, the NSW Government did appoint Justice Curlewis to investigate the card-system well after the strike ended in 1918. For the strikers this was deemed 'a farce'. As the *Herald* reported on 24 January 1918, for Walter Padgen, Secretary of the Amalgamated Society of Engineers and sacked Eveleigh worker, this demonstrated that the Government was 'about to perpetrate a grave and costly scandal, presumably for the purpose of grossly deceiving the public of New South Wales and to white-wash themselves'. It was 'making a mockery of Justice' since Curlewis had 'frequently dealt very trenchantly with the unions which would be called upon to support their contentions before the commission' and his 'many expressions' over the years had proved him to be biased against unions. Predictably, this Inquiry found that the card-system had not been detrimental to the workers, although the Judge did admit that the cards could be used 'to the detriment' of workers if a foreman was 'disposed to be spiteful or vindictive'.

### **(iii) longer-term outcomes and implications**

The victimisation of those who had struck in 1917 continued after the Curlewis Royal Commission. Continuing concern about the dismissal of the strikers, blacklisting of union officials and demotion of those re-employed in the railways and tramways no doubt contributed to the swing against the Nationalist Government in the NSW election in March 1920. On winning office for Labor, Premier John Storey immediately appointed a Royal

Commission into the gaoling of the twelve IWW members who had been arrested in 1916 and directed the Railway Commissioner to restore jobs and seniority to 2,000 railways workers. In the face of the Commissioner's refusal to comply, the Storey Government appointed a Royal Commission into the Administration, Control and Economy of the Railway and Tramway Services of NSW. Headed by Justice Walter Edmunds and conducted between October 1920 and November 1921, this inquiry investigated the violation of the strike settlement. H.V. Evatt appeared for the railway and tramway unions and a few years later ran for Parliament.

Justice Edmunds found that railway management had 'violated the terms of the strike settlement' and denied 'procedural justice' for the strikers. His recommended restoration of seniority for the strikers and re-employment for future vacancies was ignored by the Nationalists Government elected in April 1922 and became a cause celebre for the State's labour movement and the Leader of the NSW ALP, J.T. Lang. In 1925 following the re-election of a Labor Government, Lang took action to restore the victimized railway and tramway employees' rights and entitlements through the *Railways Amendment and Reinstatement Act* and in 1927, he introduced a Bill to amend the *Railways Act* so that employee representatives could be added to the Railway and Tramway Commission. On his re-election in 1930, Lang finally addressed the most significant legacy of the 1917 Strike by challenging the time-keeping system adopted in 1917 in his capacity as Minister for Railways.

This focus on political avenues to address industrial issues had its origins in the 1890s, when workers formed Labour Leagues and a number of railway workers were elected to the NSW Parliament as Labor Party representatives. In total, 8 railway and tramway workers who stayed out for the duration of the 1917 strike became Labor Members of State and Federal Parliaments. Included among them were J.B. Chifley, Prime Minister between 1945 and 1949; Eddie Ward, MHR for East Sydney between 1931 and 1963; John Joseph Cahill, elected as a NSW MP for St. George in 1925 and later NSW Premier between 1952 and 1959; and Walter Thomas Padgen who was a member of the NSW Legislative Council between 1946 and 1955 and Mayor of Randwick in 1948. These men, among others, played a critical role in ameliorating the worst outcomes of 1917 and in enabling improvements in industrial rights more generally. It is possible to argue that the introduction of compulsory voting federally in 1924 and in NSW in 1928 made an important contribution to this outcome.

While it is true that the Strike represented a major defeat for many trade unions and those who struck, the number of strikers who became active in Federal and State politics after participating in the 1917 Strike, illustrates that the event also built a foundation for the future. As Bollard (2007: 200-201), correctly pointed out: the 'defeat was not a final defeat, but a sharp lesson to a movement that remained, in general, on an upward trajectory. ... the rebuilding of the movement from the mid-1930s and into wartime' enabled 'more substantial and permanent victories' to be secured. Like Bollard, we are led to the inexorable conclusion that the solidarity of the workers of 1917 also provided the basis 'for regroupment and resurgence'. Accordingly, we need to remember the lessons of 1917 and be prepared for resurgence. In the process, opposing efforts to undermine our compulsory voting system (Bagshaw, 1917).

Second, the widespread demands by hundreds of thousands of citizens for an independent inquiry during and after the 1917 Strike, for government impartiality in the public interest and not in support of sectional benefits remain salient today. Arguably the importance of impartiality for courts, judges and commissions of inquiry remain as important today as they were in 1917, as developments in relation to Commission appointments and actions in recent times demonstrate (Baines and Smiley, 1917). It is worthwhile recalling government actions taken in 1916 and 1917 against the IWW and Padgen's views about the appointment of the Curlewis Royal Commission in 1918 in this context.

Finally, we need to take heed of the 1917 striker's prescience in relation to scientific management as posing a major threat in terms of work conditions and employment outcomes. Despite Premier Lang's efforts in the early 1930s, Taylor's system has prevailed in a myriad of ways. As Bain, Watson, Mulvey, Taylor and Gall (2002: 173) argued, 'the application of Taylorist methods to organising work in the office has long historical antecedents. The integration of information and communication technologies in recent years has enabled management to expand monitoring of office work exponentially'. For Brown, Lauder and Ashton (2008: 139) 'the twenty-first century' is 'the age of digital Taylorism', whereby technology is being harnessed 'to standardize functions and jobs' and 'being applied to managerial and professional work'. I have also outlined the long-term impact of this system on education (Taksa, 1917). At a time when electronic surveillance and artificial intelligence is gaining prominence, it is worthwhile acknowledging the 1917 strikers' recognition that this system not only threatened to individualise, deskill and dehumanise them but most importantly threatened their capacity to act in their collective interests.

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<sup>1</sup> This brief article is based on the following research: Taksa, L. (1983) Social Protests and the NSW General Strike of 1917. Unpublished Honours Thesis, UNSW; Taksa, L. (1994) All a Matter of Timing: The Diffusion of Scientific Management in New South Wales, Prior to 1921. Unpublished PhD Thesis, UNSW.

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