USE OF THESSES

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THE LABOUR MOVEMENT
IN WOLLONGONG, NEW SOUTH WALES:
1928-39

by

LEN RICHARDSON

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Australian National University.

January 1974
This thesis is my own work.

LEN RICHARDSON
Len Richardson: 'The Labour Movement in Wollongong, New South Wales 1928-39'

CORRIGENDA

p. 7 line 18 for '14,600' read '14,600,000'.

p.28 lines 2-7 quotation marks 'the intensity of ... in sympathy'.

footnote 1 to read: C.B. Schedvin Australia and the Great Depression (Sydney, 1970), p.53.

p.47 line 13 for 'ten' read 'seven or eight'.

p.57 line 24 after 'collieries'. read 'Allowing for variations in wage rates and additional payments between mining districts and from pit to pit it is possible to provide a general picture of movements in wage rates in New South Wales collieries. The award rates of labourers (underground and surface) fell from 108s - 11s 6d per week in 1929 to 105s - 108s 6d in 1933. Similarly wage rates for wheelers fell from 109s 6d - 115s per week to 105s - 112s per week'.

[Commonwealth Labour Reports, 1929-33]

lines 24-5 for - 'As a consequence of this decision the weighted ...' read 'The weighted ...'

p.76 line 20 for '8'175' read '8,175'

p.80 line 18 after 'basic wage' read - 'On the other hand, the Commonwealth basic wage was subject to automatic quarterly cost of living adjustments so that (as prices fell) there was a continual reduction in the Commonwealth basic wage'.

line 19 delete 'This was in spite of the fact that, in August 1931, - read - 'On top of this ...'

p.83 line 25 after 'company's argument' read - 'The effect of the court's decision was a cut in award rates which, for some classifications reached as much as twenty-seven per cent. Wage rates for ironworkers' assistants, for example, fell from £5 per week in 1929 to £3.12.4d in 1933' [Commonwealth Labour Reports, 1929-33].

p.91 line 18 for 'affect' read 'effect'
p.92 line 15 and ) for 'In Wollongong where the problem p.93 lines 1-2 ) was most acute, rents remained at the point reached after the opening of the steelworks in 1928' - read 'In Wollongong, however, rents fell by almost one-fifth'.

p.92 line 13 for 'coalming' read 'coalmining'

p.125 footnote 1 - for '1931' read '1930'

p.185 line 16 for 'Federal Labor' read 'Independent'

p.194 line 25 for 'primary' read 'primary'

p.202 line 19 for 'affects' read 'effects'

p.202 lines 20-4 for 'Money costs were lowered in a relative sense and the incomes of primary producers raised. As a consequence the momentum of industrial expansion shifted to the metal industries' read 'Money costs were lowered in a relative sense and the momentum of industrial expansion shifted to the metal industries'.

p.234 line 23 for 'The threefold' read 'A substantial'

p.272 lines 27-8 for 'The failure of wages to keep pace with the cost of living' read 'The failure of wages (except those of men affected by automatic adjustments to the Commonwealth basic wage) to keep pace with the cost of living...'

p.277 lines 4-5 delete sentence 'For its part ... Industrial Commission'.

line 8. after 'substantially reduced' read 'For its part the FIA agreed to refer all future disputes with the company to the Industrial Commission and the union regained registration with the Commission in January 1937'

p.285 line 27 for 'allayed this dissatisfaction' read 'allayed dissatisfaction where federal award workers were concerned'

line 32 for 'all FIA members' read 'men on federal award'

p.315 line 11 for 'legalisation' read 'legislation'
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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines both the response of the Wollongong labour movement to the depression of the 1930s, and the influence of the depression experience upon the movement's organisation attitudes and actions in the years 1928-39. Accordingly, conclusions have been drawn about the relationship between working and living conditions and the changing political and industrial demands of Wollongong workers. Even so, the thesis does not support to be either a social history of Wollongong workers, or a history of labour.

The decision to confine the study to one area of New South Wales was based partly on the belief that the precise effects of and reactions to the depression were determined by local conditions. Moreover, geographical limitation allowed these particular local elements in the response to the depression to receive closer analysis. Wollongong offered an especially interesting area of study. A rural-mining community, the district had not fully shared in the general Australian prosperity of the early 1920s. The announcement in 1926 that the Illawara steelmakers G. and G. Hoskins planned to shift their works to a new site at Port Kembla, five miles from the township of Wollongong, was therefore welcomed as an augury of better times. In the event, the timing could scarcely have been more unfortunate, for before the transfer of plant and men was completed, Australia was engulfed by the depression. Yet despite the limited amount of work available, men continued to drift into the district looking for employment. As a consequence, the depression was a time of sustained population growth. The haphazard and unplanned developments of these years resulted in an acute housing shortage, desperate living conditions and industrial pollution. The 1930s were therefore a period of fundamental economic and social change. All sections of society experienced difficulties in adjusting to the problems associated with the birth of an industrial town.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I acknowledge with gratitude the help given me by my supervisor Dr Robin Gollan. In particular I have benefited from his knowledge of and interest in New South Wales coalminers and their union. His book on that subject was a starting point for this thesis and is frequently cited in the text. I am indebted also to Dr J.A. Merritt who kindly made available to me information and material he gathered when writing his Ph.D. thesis on the Federated Ironworkers' Association.

In the early stages of this research I was helped by Dr J. Hagan, Dr I.H. Burnley, Mr C. Fisher, Mr A. Kruger (ER & S), Mr R.J. Pierson (Metal Manufactures), Mr R.A. Walmsley (ER & S). I am grateful to the staff of the Wollongong Library, especially Miss N. McDonald, who helped me locate sources. At the stage of writing and revising I have had the benefit of comments by Dr David Walker, Dr Ged Martin and Mr Norman Mitchell. Parts of the manuscript have been read by Dr Winifred Mitchell and Mr T. Cutler. I have an old debt and a continuing one to Mr W.J. Gardner of the History Department at Canterbury University, who carefully read each chapter, and whose comments have always been pointed, valuable and encouraging.

To the many who were willing to talk to me about their depression experiences I owe a special debt. Many of the formal interviews are acknowledged throughout the text and in the bibliography. In particular, however, I wish to thank Mr Dan Timmins who, with a great deal of enthusiasm and often at some inconvenience to himself, put me in contact with many retired mineworkers and local identities.

Most of all, I am indebted to my wife Beverley for her help and encouragement, and to my three children, Peter, Barry and Shelley for their patience.
<table>
<thead>
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<th>Abbreviation</th>
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<tr>
<td>ACTU</td>
<td>Australian Council of Trade Unions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AEU</td>
<td>Amalgamated Engineering Union</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AIS</td>
<td>Australian Iron and Steel Ltd</td>
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<td>ALP</td>
<td>Australian Labor Party</td>
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<td>ASE</td>
<td>Australian Society of Engineers</td>
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<td>AWU</td>
<td>Australian Workers' Union</td>
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<td>BHP</td>
<td>Broken Hill Pty Co. Ltd</td>
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<tr>
<td>CAR</td>
<td>Commonwealth Arbitration Reports</td>
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<td>CLR</td>
<td>Commonwealth Law Reports</td>
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<tr>
<td>ER &amp; S</td>
<td>Electrolytic Refining and Smelting Co. Ltd</td>
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<tr>
<td>ETU</td>
<td>Electrical Trades Union</td>
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<tr>
<td>FEDFA</td>
<td>Federated Engine Drivers' and Firemen's Association</td>
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<td>FIA</td>
<td>Federated Ironworkers' Association</td>
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<tr>
<td>INW</td>
<td>Industrial Workers of the World</td>
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<tr>
<td>MMM</td>
<td>Militant Minority Movement</td>
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<td>OBU</td>
<td>One Big Union</td>
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<td>PIEUSA</td>
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INTRODUCTION

This thesis examines both the response of the Wollongong labour movement to the depression of the 1930s, and the influence of the depression experience upon the movement's organisation attitudes and actions in the years 1928-39. Accordingly, conclusions have been drawn about the relationship between working and living conditions and the changing political and industrial demands of Wollongong workers. Even so, the thesis does not purport to be either a social history of Wollongong workers or a history of labour.

The decision to confine the study to one area of New South Wales was based partly on the belief that the precise effects of and reactions to the depression were determined by local conditions. Moreover, geographical limitation allowed these particular local elements in the response to the depression to receive closer analysis. Wollongong offered an especially interesting area of study. A rural-mining community, the district had not fully shared in the general Australian prosperity of the early 1920s. The announcement in 1926 that the Lithgow steelmakers G. and C. Hoskins planned to shift their works to a new site at Port Kembla, five miles from the township of Wollongong, was therefore welcomed as an augury of better times. In the event, the timing could scarcely have been more unfortunate, for before the transfer of plant and men was complete, Australia was engulfed by the depression. Yet despite the limited amount of work available, men continued to drift into the district looking for employment. As a consequence, the depression was a time of sustained population growth. The haphazard and unplanned developments of these years resulted in an acute housing shortage, desperate living conditions and industrial pollution. The 1930s were therefore a period of fundamental economic and social change. All sections of society experienced difficulties in adjusting to the problems associated with the birth of an industrial town.
The hordes of men looking for work at Port Kembla after 1926 compounded the problems of trade union leaders already confronted with the difficult task of establishing union organisation in a new industrial sphere during a period of growing unemployment. Moreover, the depression struck before a strong Trades and Labor Council which could co-ordinate the activities of individual unions, was firmly established. One concern of this thesis is to discover the process by which Wollongong unions came to act together on matters of common interest. The depression experience is seen as sharpening workers' consciousness of their collective interests as distinct from those of other sections of society. The term 'working class' has been used in the thesis as a general term to describe the various categories of workers when acting in common.

As with any slice of local history, the initial problem was to establish the area to be studied. Wollongong, as it is now known, dates from 1947. In that year, the township and municipality of Wollongong was joined with three adjacent local government areas to form the City of Greater Wollongong. The decision to amalgamate the four local government areas was based on a realistic appraisal of both the district's history and current developments. From early in the nineteenth century the township of Wollongong had been the administrative and financial centre for the district. The establishment of the steelworks helped strengthen this position and promised to give the district a stronger economic base.

In the title and throughout the thesis 'Wollongong' has been used in its modern form to indicate the entire district. In an important sense, however, this usage is misleading. So imbued were contemporaries with the intense parochialism of the individual communities that people from settlements a few miles apart considered each other outsiders. This parochialism was conditioned historically by the manner in which the separate communities had grown up around the coalmines that gave them life. Yet even now there is scarcely a Wollongong identity. Many locals still consider themselves to belong to Coledale or Bulli or Port Kembla and only secondarily to Wollongong.
Once the area of study was defined the problems of statistical and political boundaries asserted themselves. Since the boundaries used in this study are those of local government areas many sections of the Commonwealth Census are directly applicable. The district also corresponded almost exactly with two state electorates named, at various times, Illawarra, Wollongong or Bulli. In the 1930s Wollongong was only part of the federal electorate of Werryla. Similarly, production and employment figures for the New South Wales coal industry were collected by mining districts and, while the southern mining district is largely contained within the Wollongong area, there were often one or two small collieries operating outside the Wollongong district. To this extent production and employment figures used throughout the text are slightly inflated.

Documentary evidence for a history of the Wollongong labour movement is sparse. This is partly a reflection of the disruptive affect of the depression upon trade unions and labour organisations generally, and partly endemic to local history. Both the Illawarra Trades and Labor Council and the Port Kembla branch of the FIA ceased to function during the depression. At best most miners' lodges met infrequently. The records of the national executive bodies of the FIA and the Miners' Federation are almost complete but local branch records are meagre or non-existent. The minute books of the Port Kembla FIA branch could not be located. Few minute books of individual mine lodges survive. The records of the southern mining district executive body are missing for the period 1933-8. Moreover, those minute books which have survived are often not very informative. The activities of the coalminers fortunately received good coverage in both local newspapers, the Illawarra Mercury and the South Coast Times. Until the publication by the FIA of their own broadsheet, the Steel & Metal Worker, information on the ironworkers is sparse.

Employers' records have provided an almost complete picture of the impact of the depression upon production and to a lesser extent employment at the Port Kembla industrial plants. There are nevertheless significant gaps in the
information available. Little material remains on the
operation of the steelworks before Hoskins merged with BHP
in 1935. BHP made available some of the Port Kembla General
Manager Business Sheets for the period after 1935. As well
the company answered queries on specific points. The records
of the Port Kembla companies (Metal Manufactures and ER & S)
are more comprehensive than those available for the
steelworks. Both companies provided access to their records.
The most serious gap in the records of the employers was the
almost total lack of information available on the coal
companies and their marketing association, the Southern
Colliery Proprietors' Association. To some degree, however,
this deficiency was made good by the report of a Royal
Commission into the New South Wales coal industry published
in 1930.

A further difficulty, related to the problem of sources
and common to all local histories, was the 'normality' or
'abnormality' of Wollongong in its attitudes. Should the
historian of a locality explain events in terms of local
peculiarities or by reference to wider forces stirring in
the country as a whole? To some extent this difficulty was
lessened by the existence of histories of the two unions
which dominated the Wollongong labour movement in the 1930s,
the FIA and the Miners' Federation.1 Together these two
works provide a frame of reference against which the actions
of Wollongong coalminers and ironworkers may be set. In
other areas, however, the body of secondary literature remains
slight. There is as yet no history of the New South Wales
labour movement after 1920, nor a general history of New
South Wales. Consequently, it has sometimes proved necessary
to dwell upon the main background events.

The use of oral evidence has helped overcome some of
the deficiencies of the written and printed sources. The
pitfalls of oral history are well known and need not be
detailed here. Yet the testimony of participants may be

1Robin Gollan, The Coalminers of New South Wales (Melbourne,
1963); J.A. Merritt, 'A History of the Federated Ironworkers'
University, 1967).
subjected to much the same checks as other forms of evidence. It may be examined for internal inconsistencies or bias, tested against what fragments of the written record remain or compared with the recollections of those who shared similar experiences. As a general observation the recollection by participants of events, well documented elsewhere, appear surprisingly accurate in their recall of the detail and sequence of events. This in itself is some indication of the depression's impact upon workers in Wollongong. Oral evidence was especially useful in helping to put flesh on the bones of such secret organisations as the Unemployed Workers' Movement and the New Guard. Finally, the emphasis throughout is on the unique features of the Wollongong labour movement's depression experience. Some attempt has been made to suggest the points at which Wollongong experience is different from that of other districts. In the absence of similar studies in other locations meaningful comparison has not been possible.
CHAPTER ONE

THE BIRTH AND EARLY PROBLEMS OF AN INDUSTRIAL TOWN

The Wollongong-Port Kembla community is located on a narrow coastal plain some sixteen miles long and, until it reaches Lake Illawarra in the south, nowhere more than five miles wide. Bounded to the north and west by a steep scarp averaging 1,300 feet in height the district forms a geographic unit. The Illawarra scarp has had a profound influence upon the district’s history. It formed a barrier against early penetration and settlement and hindered the development of overland communication with Sydney. The shale and sandstone strata of the scarp, however, overlay substantial coal measures which were later proved to exist under the whole central region of New South Wales outcropping in the north near Newcastle and in the south near Wollongong. A surface manifestation of the Illawarra deposits was discovered at Coalcliff in 1797 but commercial exploitation did not follow for a further fifty-two years. During the second half of the nineteenth century the adits in the Illawarra scarp led to substantial coal measures. The coal was removed downhill by the early railways whose course followed that of the streams draining eastwards.1 Settlements straggled along the railways southwards towards the artificial harbour at Wollongong.2

In 1921 the Wollongong district, co-extensive with the municipalities of Wollongong, Central Illawarra, Northern Illawarra and the Shire of Bulli, had a population of 32,381 and an area of 171,456 acres.3 More than half of this

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3 Census of the Commonwealth of Australia, 1921, pp.368-9.
population lived in small settlements such as Coalcliff, Helensburgh, Clifton and Bulli which grew up in the coastal foothills around the pits that gave them life. By the mid-1920s there was an almost continuous line of settlement for a distance of seventeen miles north of the township of Wollongong. ¹ To English novelist D.H. Lawrence, the son of a Nottingham coalminer, writing in 1922 while living at Thirroul, the villages appeared more like mining camps than regular settlements. The bungalows were

...sprinkled about like a great camp, close together, yet none touching, and getting thinner towards the sea... The place was half and half. There were many tin roofs - but not so many. There were the wide, unmade roads running so straight as it were to nowhere, with little bungalow homes half-lost at the side. ²

Rudimentary and unpretentious though the coalmining communities were the extraction of coal had, as yet, Lawrence wrote, hardly disfigured the landscape. ³

The township of Wollongong at the southern extremity of the coalfield and co-extensive with the municipality of the same name had a population of 6,708 of whom some 5,000 lived in the closely built-up parts of the town where the population density ranged from 500 to as many as 3,000 per square mile. ⁴ But even here there were wide differences between the sparsely settled areas on the fringes, particularly on the poorly drained narrow coastal plain, and the more heavily populated low hills upon which the township was built. The main thoroughfares of the township were narrow and hilly and the business houses lacked the ostentation of mercantile or industrial wealth. A service town for a growing dairying industry in the mid-nineteenth century Wollongong retained this function in later years. Civic positions were still almost exclusively the preserve of commercial and landed families whose associations with the

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¹ Catherine Doyle, op.cit., p.45.  
³ Ibid., p.88.  
⁴ Catherine Doyle, op.cit., p.46.
district pre-dated the development of the coal industry. Even in 1920 grazing impinged on the fringes of the built-up area and southwards, where the coastal plain widens and is broken by a low ridge, the residential area abruptly gave way to grazing lands. In this southernmost sector the coastal frontage behind the swampy margins of Lake Illawarra were badly drained, the soil acidic and able to support only swamp oaks. Inland from this useless tract the rolling foothills of Central Illawarra supported an extensive dairy farming industry. Sparsely populated with 0.7 persons to the acre, the southern municipality occupied almost one third of the area. Port Kembla, the site of future industrial development was, as yet, little more than a cluster of houses amidst uncleared farm land.

Despite these rural attachments, commercial and business spokesmen considered Wollongong in the 1920s to be a "coaltown" and ascribed fluctuations in the district's prosperity to the fortunes of the coal industry. In 1921 by conservative estimate one third of the district's work force were employed in the coal industry. North of the Wollongong residential area the figures were considerably higher. In the Municipality of Northern Illawarra more than fifty per cent of all workers were working in or about the mines, while in the Bulli Shire forty per cent of the male work-force were so engaged. The coal industry, however, influenced the livelihood of a much greater number than this. The

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1 Ibid.
2 *Illawarra Mercury*, 4 December 1920.
3 The 1921 census does not enumerate gainfully employed males but classifies the male work force by industry as a proportion of the total male population. Calculations based on these figures show that close to twenty-five per cent of the total male population were engaged in the mining of coal. Since roughly twenty per cent of the male population in 1921 were either between the ages of 0-15 years or over 70 years it follows that at least thirty-six per cent of gainfully employed males were working in the coal industry. *Census of the Commonwealth of Australia, 1921*, pp.370-2. See also Appendix A: Distribution of male work force by industry, 1921-33, p.341.
4 Ibid.
transportation of coal had stimulated the volume of rail traffic and in 1921 railway workers constituted a further ten per cent of the male population whose livelihood was directly linked with that of the southern coal industry. Indeed entire communities with their local shops — grocers, butchers and so on — depended wholly or in large degree on the coal industry.

The economic fortunes of the coal industry during the 1920s made this dependence an extremely unfortunate one. The demand for coal had increased with population and industry in the Australian colonies. Australian internal demand, however, was from the outset less important for the southern district because the 'quality' of the coal was such that it was restricted in the main, both at home and overseas, to use in ships' bunkering.¹ The demand for coal depends in the first instance on its quality or chemical composition. The presence or absence of various elements in a coal determine whether or not it will be used for a particular purpose and, therefore, whether or not buyers will prefer it to other coals. Southern coal which had a lower percentage of volatile hydrocarbons than northern coal gave off less soot and was more suitable for ships' boilers, where the narrow flues and tubes were easily blocked.

The very characteristics which gave southern coal an advantage in steamship use placed it at a disadvantage in other markets. Factory boilers, railway engines and gas-making required coal which contained a high percentage of volatile hydrocarbons and which would cake in the fire. Since northern coal more nearly met these requirements southern coal initially found little favour in Australian internal markets.

The largest consumer in New South Wales, the government, took relatively little coal from the southern district which could underquote competitors but could not offer suitable coal. Until 1890 coal from Lithgow, ninety miles west of Sydney, and not local coals were used on the Illawarra railway, and

¹I am indebted to Mr C. Fisher for allowing me to read his unpublished manuscript, 'Limits on the market for Southern District Coal, 1870-80'.
Wollongong gasworks used southern coal only when it was mixed with northern. Cokeworks tended to use only the poorer quality coal which would otherwise have been dumped into the sea. The characteristics of southern coal which made it unacceptable in the Australian internal market also made it unacceptable for foreign domestic markets.

Regular contracts for steamships' bunker coal, for ocean going and coastal vessels, together with exports to foreign ports formed the hard core of southern business but even though this trade grew, it was never large enough to keep all the mines working continuously. Excess capacity was thus a characteristic feature of the district's mines towards the end of the nineteenth century and it led to frequent closure of them. Such intermittent working resulted in relatively high production costs. To avoid these costs and to keep their mines working full-time the southern mineowners competed for government contracts. Such competition forced down both the selling price and the hewing rates paid to miners. The general picture of southern mining remained substantially unchanged throughout the early years of the twentieth century, though the construction of an artificial harbour at Port Kembla in 1903 increased the district's ability to compete with Newcastle for the export trade and, as the volume of coal required by the railways grew, the marginal quality of southern coal was offset by proximity to railway depots. Nevertheless the bunker trade remained the principal market for southern coal.¹

In the early 1920s however, competition for external markets intensified as Australia was drawn into what Mauldon has termed 'the world war in coal'² stemming directly from the loss of Australia's export markets during the First World War, which were not later regained. The Australian export trade which, between 1900 and 1913 had accounted for approximately thirty per cent of total output, had by 1927 fallen to

¹ Mines Department Reports, 1927-1930.
² F.R.E. Mauldon, The Economics of Australian Coal (Melbourne, 1929), p.2.
thirteen per cent. The fall was due partly to a decline in coal consumption as countries importing Australian coal developed substitute resources; partly, to fuller development by importing countries of their own resources; partly, to the increasing competition from cheap labour countries such as South Africa, the East Indies, India and China; and also to the irregular deliveries of Australian coal.

The bunkering-trade upon which the southern mines were so reliant suffered, the coal companies alleged, particularly from increased South African competition. As an incentive for mining companies to enter the bunkering market the South African Government offered a rebate of 7s 9d per ton of 2,000 pounds on all surplus South African coal taken aboard for bunkering at ports of the Union.¹ Government encouragement was one advantage for South Africa, strategic location another. A considerable number of ships sailed the southern routes between the seaboard centres in Europe, America and Africa on the Atlantic side and African, Indian, East Indian and Australian ports bordering the Indian Ocean to the east. The union's ports were well situated to take advantage of this trading pattern. Durban alone developed a bunker trade half as large again as the volume to which bunker sales had fallen in Australia. To combat South African inroads southern owners demanded similar rebates on bunker coal transported by rail, and sought the reduction of port and harbour dues.² By 1927 rail charges on coal had increased by between thirty-eight to ninety-six per cent and coal owners were quick to point to the pegging of wool freights and the comparatively slight increases, of between five and forty per cent, on wheat and livestock carried by rail.³ Rebates, however, would not have diminished the South African advantage to any serious extent. Moreover, a Tariff Board inquiry reached the conclusion that the effect of the South African rebate on

¹Ibid., p.139.

²Illawarra Mercury, 6 July 1928.

³Ibid.
Australian bunker sales was negligible. Further, a diminishing demand for bunker coal was inevitable since more than half the world's ships in construction were motor ships propelled by internal combustion engines.

The loss of coastal and overseas bunkering trade meant that southern coal mines were forced to compete with northern mines and among themselves for a larger share of internal trade. To add to their misfortunes the Australian mining industry was an acute case of the general malaise that affected the Australian economy at the end of the war and the years immediately afterwards. It did not improve. Australian demand for New South Wales coal had fallen away as other states, especially Victoria, developed their own resources. A further diminution stemmed from the increasing development and extended use of alternative sources of power. Australian coal mines were simply producing more coal than the country required. The estimated productive capacity of New South Wales mines was 14,600 tons. The markets offering in 1928 amounted to only 9,460,000. It was calculated by a Royal Commission in 1929 that the southern district employed 1,374 more miners than were needed.

The generally inferior quality of Illawarra coal seriously weakened the competitive ability of southern mines. Throughout the early depression years although employing one-quarter of New South Wales miners the southern district secured only twelve and a half per cent of government coal


2Mauldon, op.cit., p.139.

3Transcript Commonwealth Court of Conciliation and Arbitration: Bellambi Coal Co. Ltd, and others versus Australasian Coal and Shale Employees Federation. Evidence p.4, 15 August 1930.

4Ibid.

contracts. Smaller mines, particularly those in the southern portion of the district suffered on two counts; they could neither offer sufficient quantities of coal nor coal of suitable quality. The Mt Keira mine, for example, did not win its first railway contract until 1932 and even then the consignment was rejected because it contained excessive fines and slack. Though the company consistently quoted lower prices than its competitors it was unsuccessful in further bids for government contracts.

The nature of the mining enterprises operating in the southern district compounded these problems. There were two main types of company. The first were dominated by shipping interests whose directors were often associated with banking and financial houses and in other coal companies within Australia and overseas. Coal companies of the second type were more independent concerns which provided coal for specific local markets. The Metropolitan Coal Company was an example of the first category. It was controlled by Huddart Parker Industries which operated a fleet of twenty coastal steamers. As well Huddart Parker held a majority interest in Hebburn Ltd, which owned collieries in northern New South Wales. Through an interest in the Adelaide Steamship Company it was linked by directorships, common shareholdings and by partnership with BHP. Two shipping companies, McIlwraith, McEachern Ltd, and Burns Philp and Company Ltd, were the principal shareholders in the Bellambi Coal Company. Further, the Melbourne Steamship Company substantially owned the Mt Pleasant and North Bulli collieries. Coalcliff and Mt Keira mines were controlled by E.J. Vickery and Sons Ltd, a Sydney company which was also linked with numerous shipping concerns.

1Mt Keira Colliery Annual Reports, 1928-33 (Australian National University Archives Series 59/5); South Coast Times, 22 September 1933.

2Ibid.

The Wongawilli colliery is the best example of an independent mine standing outside this shipping interest. It was purchased in 1916 by G. & C. Hoskins the Lithgow iron and steel makers. Since its entire production was used by Hoskins, Wongawilli was a 'captive pit'. In general the remaining collieries which were not directly connected with shipping interests provided coal for various public utilities including the state railways department and for gas-making plants.

The predominance of the shipping interests had two important consequences. In the first place, profits from shipping and other enterprises enabled many coal proprietors to sustain continued losses in the trading of their mines. Secondly, the ability of the owners to live off reserves and earnings from other sources was a major obstacle to any attempted rationalisation of the southern coal industry. There was only a limited degree of co-operation between the owners. Some of the shipping companies negotiated reciprocal agreements to ensure a constant supply of coal for their ships. The majority of the coal owners were also joined in the Southern Colliery Proprietors' Association. It was through this body that they made joint representations to federal and state arbitration courts. Generally, however, the interests of the owners conflicted more often than they converged.

The struggle for diminishing markets expressed itself so far as the workers were concerned in extreme intermittency of employment, so that while wage rates had increased consistently from 1914 onwards actual earnings did not keep pace. Between 1914 and 1928 rates for miners and wheelers increased by one hundred and thirty per cent and one hundred and one per cent respectively whereas, for the same period, the cost of living increased by sixty and seventy per cent and the average wage for all industries by eighty-two per cent. Allowing for variations from district to district and from pit to pit, a broad picture of miners' earnings for the financial

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2 See Mauldon, *The Economics of Australian Coal*, pp.75-80.
year ending 30 June 1928 may be obtained from the report of the 1929 Royal Commission. The Commission examined net earnings for three broad categories of workers: miners, machinemen, shooters and fillers; other underground workers (excluding staff and boys); and workers above ground (excluding staff and boys). Men in the first category worked an average of six days per fortnight and earned £8 19s 7d; those in the second category, 'other underground workers', earned £8 18s 7d by working 8.3 days a fortnight; those in the third category, 'workers above ground' received £9 18s 2d for working 9.6 days a fortnight. In other words intermittency of employment reduced actual earnings especially for underground workers. This at a time when the basic wage was £8 10s 0d per fortnight.1

Thus on the average southern district miners received a little above the basic wage although a large proportion received less than the average for all industries. Some twenty-one per cent of mineworkers received less than the basic wage and about fifty per cent received less than the average for all industries. At the other end of the scale about five per cent, the majority of whom were contract workers, received more than £18 a fortnight and a little more than one per cent received above £20 per fortnight. Nearly a quarter of the district's miners were, in 1928, living below what was commonly accepted in Australia as subsistence level.

In their efforts to achieve more regular employment and better working conditions the miners were able to summon considerable industrial and political support. In the first place, Wollongong coalminers were organised as the southern district of the Miners Federation, a national union of miners which had been formed in 1916.2 Each pit within the coalfield elected a lodge secretary and committee to represent them in discussions with individual mine managers. Further, each lodge sent a representative to a district delegate board.

1Royal Commission on the Coal Industry, p.133. Southern salaries are inflated by the inclusion of overtime rates.

2There were three New South Wales districts of the Miners' Federation: a northern district centred on the Newcastle coalfield; a western district based on the Lithgow area; and the southern district centred on Wollongong.
This body was presided over by two permanent and salaried officials - a district president and secretary. Both executive positions were elected in an annual ballot of all southern miners. There were other unions, such as the Deputies and Shotfirers' Association, the Federated Engine Drivers and Firemen's Association, and the Amalgamated Engineering Union, with a handful of members at each colliery. It was the Miners' Federation, however, which dominated the local labour movement.

As well as performing the ordinary industrial functions of a trade union the southern miners assumed a central role in working class political organisation in the Wollongong district. Their influence was fortified by the structure and rules of the ALP. Members of unions affiliated to the party were entitled to vote at pre-selective ballots for the election of a parliamentary candidate to represent the electorate in which they resided. Partly as a consequence of this Wollongong had returned a coalminer to the state parliament since 1891. In that year J.B. Nicholson, the then southern miners' secretary, was one of thirty-six successful candidates in Labor's initial venture into the parliamentary field. Nicholson was scarcely a reliable party man and he defied the party when it declared against conscription in 1916. In the 1917 state election he stood as a Nationalist candidate and was defeated by W.A. Davies who was, like Nicholson before him, secretary of the southern district prior to entering politics.

The attitude of southern miners towards participation in politics, however, fluctuated throughout the 1920s. The involvement of the Miners' Federation in the One Big Union (OBU), a projected alliance of national unions did not

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3 See Win Mitchell, op.cit.
necessarily imply a move away from politics. The OBU aimed to eliminate the craft system, to prevent internecine rivalry between small unions and to remind workers that the proper object of their animosity was the capitalist class. Its leaders also hoped to pave the way for the eventual control of industry by workers. Yet, unlike the International Workers of the World (IWW) its syndicalist forerunner, the OBU did not abjure political action.\footnote{See Ian Bedford, 'The One Big Union 1918-1923', in Ian Bedford and Ross Curnow, Initiative and Organization (Melbourne, 1963), pp.5-43.}

After 1928 a small section of southern coalminers, principally the Militant Minority Movement (MMM) a loose organisation of rank and file miners influenced by the Communist Party did, however, profess a syndicalist distrust of political action.\footnote{In the Wollongong district the MMM, which was formed in 1928, was numerically insignificant. Mr D. Timmins and Mr L. Boardman, who were both active members of the movement, estimate that there were between fifteen and twenty supporters on the south coast during the 1920s. Interviews, 8 June 1972, 7 September 1972.} As economic conditions worsened throughout the 1920s most miners shed their anti-political prejudices. For whereas unions which relied on direct action alone seemed able to operate effectively only when there was a sellers' market for labour, the parliamentary Labor party could continue to press the claims of the unions regardless of the economic climate. Consequently, between 1922 and 1925 the leadership of the Miners' Federation swung firmly behind the ALP. A.C. Willis, the federation's foundation president, emerged from the faction fighting which beset the state ALP during the 1920s as one of the inner controlling group. The shift back towards reliance upon the political wing of the movement was attacked by MMM spokesmen and received only qualified support from many other miners. Whatever their reservations, most coalminers realised, however, that Labor was the only party with a chance of forming a government which might legislate in their favour.
Wollongong Plebs League, 1925:

J. Walker, J. Martin, S. Best, P. McHenry,
E.H. Bostick, J. Murray.
The division between those coalminers who favoured greater use of the strike and those who preferred a more cautious policy is evident from their reactions to the declining demand for Australian coal. All miners agreed that they faced the greatest economic crisis in the history of their industry but were divided as to how it should be met. Southern miners' officials accepted the claim of their employers that the price of coal was too high to compete with overseas rivals. Few miners, however, were willing to accept the suggestion of the Southern Colliery Proprietors' Association that wages should be cut to allow a reduction. Rather, they resorted to a conspiracy theory and southern district president, F. (Fred) Lowden, claimed that the price of Australian coal was artificially inflated by 'secret commissions and a multiplicity of selling agents'.

Whatever explanations miners offered for the coal crisis the most pressing problem was to find a means of protecting their livelihood. A minority advocated a general stoppage to bring the owners to their knees and force a government enquiry. The Miners' Federation, however, was in chronic financial difficulties and unable to finance existing local disputes let alone a general stoppage. In March 1926 the executive of the federation announced that while its strike levy of one and a quarter per cent was bringing in £2,800 a fortnight, £6,000 was needed to finance current disputes. In the same year the southern district contributed nearly £10,000 to the Miners' Federation and almost £4,000 in 1927 or a total of approximately £14,000 for the two years. During the same period, however, intermittency and relief payments from the federation exceeded £16,000. Southern officials in an effort to explain the imbalance, argued that as intermittency had increased since 1925 so too had the number of small strikes. More frequent strike action, was, they claimed, at least

1. Illawarra Mercury, 3 May 1928.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
partly attributable to the federations' decision in 1925 to pay strike-money from the first day of a stoppage.¹ Miners, the officials alleged, were beginning to look on strike-pay as a kind of intermittency payment or unemployment relief.

The increasing inability of the Miners' Federation to meet the demands of lodges not only produced a corresponding loss of confidence in the executive but also employers, sensing the weaker financial position of the federation, were encouraged to effect economies in working conditions. They also began to adopt a tougher line in on-the-spot negotiations with the miners for special payments. Further, limited funds compelled the federation to adopt a policy of selecting particular grievances on which it was prepared to make a stand while at the same time dampening requests for strike action on other perhaps equally good grounds. In 1928 the federation supported a five-month strike at Coalcliff over payments in 'deficient' areas, but refused to sanction a strike on a similar question by Mt Keira miners until the Coalcliff issue had been settled.² In the event the Coalcliff dispute was lost at a cost of £9,000 to the federation and Mt Keira miners were compelled to take up their grievances with an unreceptive Arbitration Court.³

The restraints which inadequate financial support from the federation placed on the workers were obvious to all miners and the solution was equally clear: levies could be increased to meet liabilities or payments could be reduced. In June 1928 a convention assembled to consider these alternatives and the possible reorganisation of the federation along more centralised lines. In the convention debates southern representatives supported the existing leadership and advocated a reduction in payments. On both stands they were opposed by delegates who broadly shared the views of the MMM. All southern delegates supported A.C. Willis when he called

¹Ibid., p.110.
²Ibid., p.109.
³Ibid.
somewhat inconsistently for opposition to the centralisers and for a less parochial attitude by the districts. On the question of tactics southern delegates were united: militant policies could be applied only when accompanied by real strength. In times of unemployment a prudent policy of co-operation with the Arbitration Court might be wiser. Displaying a characteristically pragmatic approach most miners sought to shelter under the arbitration umbrella. A. Southern, summed up moderate thinking when he asked:

I want to know what chance we have to win [by strike action]. Of eleven lodges we have 4,000 miners and about 1,000 working four shifts a week while the remaining 3,000 are working 2½ days a week. They are clamouring for work and demanding strike pay be paid them... In his view and that of other southern delegates the answer was clear. Direct action was, for the present, an absurd policy. The federation was not strong enough to go into a fight and win. Moreover, E. Best, a Mt Keira delegate, went so far as to suggest that strikes would be less frequent if strike-pay was withheld until the fifth week of a stoppage. 

Predictably southern representatives rejected the proposition of the MMM that districts should be abolished and replaced by a central executive possessing full powers to deal with all the matters which, under the existing constitution, fell to the districts. In their view such a move would diminish and not increase rank and file control of the executive which was the main plank of their policy. Moreover, the motion, presented by northern delegates, to abolish the districts was, as Gollan says, no self-denying ordinance but rather a takeover bid. The new executive was to be based in Newcastle. Viewpoints expressed at the conference revealed that southern miners were more united in support of a defensive policy than their northern counterparts. In the end, though divisions were revealed, moderate counsels prevailed.

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2 Ibid., p.108.
3 Ibid., p.109.
Government action in July 1928, however, led many to question continued caution and to consider more seriously strike proposals. The conservative New South Wales premier, T.R. Bavin was alarmed at the state of the coal industry. He initiated conferences of owners and unions which were held in August and October. During the course of these discussions Bavin put forward a tentative solution for the coal crisis. His plan involved a 4s per ton reduction of the internal selling price of Maitland coal with a further reduction of 1s for export coal. Price-cutting was to be financed by the New South Wales government bearing 2s of the cost, the Commonwealth government the 1s on coal exported and the remaining 2s to be borne equally by the coal proprietors and the miners.

In January 1929 southern miners unanimously rejected Bavin's proposal and denounced all suggestions that wages should be cut. The central executive of the Miners' Federation formally condemned the plan on 5 February and sought the establishment of a Royal Commission. Ten days later the Associated Northern Collieries gave their employees fourteen days' notice and announced that they would reopen their mines when the miners were prepared to accept a twelve per cent wage reduction for piece-work and 1s per day less for daily workers. So began a stoppage of sixteen months which was to have serious repercussions for the entire industry.

In keeping with federation policy, J.T. Sweeney and F. Lowden, southern district officials, restrained militant demands for a general strike. Declaring that 'while in this struggle as in all others the workers should move together in one direction and be controlled from the one centre', Lowden insisted that the fighting front should be kept as short as possible. Miners should continue working until otherwise advised by the Federation. The Federal executive agreed that the dispute should be confined to the north, and financed by a

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1 Illawarra Mercury, 16 March 1929.
2 Ibid.
twelve and a half per cent levy on southern and western district miners.\(^1\)

While some were willing to demand a general strike, even more opposed the 'iniquitous percentage system'.\(^2\) Corrimal and Excelsior lodges refused to pay the levy. Lowden claimed that the lodges were not defying the executive but merely withholding the levy until federation tactics were explained to them.\(^3\) But despite Lowden's attempt to gain time and the confident assertions of the Labor Daily that all levies were being paid, many miners remained reluctant to accept voluntarily what northern miners were fighting to avoid - a twelve and a half per cent reduction in wages.\(^4\)

Southern collieries, however, were soon to benefit from the closure of the northern mines. During early April intermittency was still apparent at Mt Keira, Mt Kembla and Mt Pleasant,\(^5\) the smaller mines to the south of the coalfield. By the end of the month even these mines, however, were working better time. For the first pay-period in May all mines except Scarborough were fully operative.\(^6\) For many miners it was the first time in two years that they had drawn 'full time'.\(^7\) While there were variations from pit to pit it was common for men to draw £15 per fortnight and some earned as much as £18 per fortnight.\(^8\) With more work and wages southern miners were able to see advantages in contributing to maintain locked-out northern miners and the levy became less difficult to collect.

\(^1\)The Newcastle Colliery Association, The Cessation of Work at the Northern Collieries, pamphlet n.d. p.28.
\(^2\)Illawarra Mercury, 12 April 1929.
\(^3\)Ibid., 19 April 1929.
\(^4\)Labor Daily, 9 May 1929. See also: Illawarra Mercury, 5 April 1929.
\(^5\)Illawarra Mercury, 5, 12 April 1929.
\(^6\)South Coast Times, 26 April 1929. A pay-period consisted of ten working-days.
\(^7\)Sydney Morning Herald, 14 May 1929.
\(^8\)Illawarra Mercury, 3 May 1929.
The full implications of the northern dispute were nevertheless clear to all southern miners. Should the north be defeated reductions in the south would quickly follow. For this reason they hoped that the hearings of the Royal Commission, set up in June 1929 by state and federal governments, would enable them to win public support for an investigation of owners’ profits. Southern miners despaired, however, when the coal commission announced that unlike the Sankey Commission in Britain they would close their hearings to the public.¹ The last real hope seemed to rest with the election of a Labor Government in the October federal elections. The re-opening of the northern collieries on the pre-lockout basis was confidently expected to be the first action of the federal Labor party should it be returned to power. To hasten this end the central council voted £1,000 towards Labor’s campaign expenses.²

But Labor in power turned out to be a disappointment. For while the party gained a large majority in the House of Representatives, it held only seven of the thirty-six seats in the Senate. This was a situation which during 1929 and the early months of 1930 made it powerless to act decisively on the coal crisis. Southern miners were in no mood to appreciate the Scullin government’s predicament. They advocated an immediate withdrawal from the ALP and advised the Miners’ Federation to demand the return of its £1,000 contribution to the party’s election fund.³

Negotiations in the north continued, but it was now clear that the federation’s policy of limiting the struggle had failed. Southern miners were more ready to listen to charges of disloyalty and hypocrisy levelled against their leaders and more inclined to accept the argument of the MMM that only a general stoppage would halt the catastrophic defeat in which they found themselves. Lowden's argument that loyalty meant carrying out the combined unions' policy of continuing

¹Ibid., 5 July 1929.
²Miners’ Federation Central Council Minutes (CCM), 24 September 1929.
³Illawarra Mercury, 6 December 1929.
production and providing financial support for miners in the north gained nothing in conviction by frequent repetition.\(^1\)

In December 1929 the Nationalist Government of New South Wales determined to re-open the northern mines with non-union labour and despatched an armed police contingent to enforce its decision. This aggression strengthened the influence of general strike advocates. The death of a young miner, Norman Brown, shot during a clash between police and pickets at Rothbury, heightened emotions and underscored the militant argument that further government attacks could only be withstood by widening the strike.\(^2\)

Southern district officials called an immediate stop-work. More than 1,000 miners attended to mark the death of a comrade 'foully murdered by servants of the coal owners and the Government'\(^3\) the victim, miners said, of a 'judicial murder by a hired assassin'.\(^4\) Feeling ran high and a South Bulli spokesman was counted out when he advocated a return to work. Militant spokesmen felt Bavin's recent public admission that coal supplies were running low gave them a strategic advantage. They could paralyse the country's coal supplies and compel direct intervention by the federal government. Militants claimed that officials had led a retreat by stubbornly clinging to a policy of non-extension.\(^5\) Moreover, they claimed it was federation policy to adopt direct action when conciliation failed - and never before had conciliation failed so demonstrably. The rank and file must give the lead officials had failed to provide and declare their support for a general strike. MMM leaders backed their convictions with a definite plan. Two delegates from each lodge were to attend a delegate board meeting and summon a special convention to control a nation-wide coal strike and establish rank and file

\(^1\)Ibid., 30 November 1929.

\(^2\)For a detailed treatment of the events at Rothbury see Miriam Dixson, 'Rothbury' in Robert Cooksey (ed.), The Great Depression in Australia, pp.14-26.

\(^3\)Labor Daily, 18 December 1929.

\(^4\)Ibid.

\(^5\)Ibid.
committees. The delegate board should then form itself into a district council of action with authority to add to its number representatives from other unions.¹

When put to the vote these proposals were defeated by 506 to 452.² Apart from the Labor Daily representative, R. Allen, newspaper reporters were excluded from the meeting and it is difficult to gauge the degree of support for a general strike. Allen, an unemployed coalminer and MMM sympathiser, claimed that although the movement's proposals were rejected most miners favoured strike action and that disagreement was confined to questions of timing and organisation.³ His view underplays the continuing support for the official federation policy of non-extension. An anonymous South Bulli miner probably expressed the doubts of the majority when he asked the source and the extent of financial support southern miners could expect should they strike.⁴ In the event 'a sizeable majority',⁵ supported an immediate return to work.

If the miners were, as Allen suggests, divided only in their attitude towards an immediate general strike they were more nearly unanimous in their denunciation of the Federal Labor Government. Militants accused Labor politicians of merely administering the affairs of the capitalist state for the benefit of employers yet at the same time asked that they declare a state of national emergency to demonstrate continued support for Australian workers.⁶ The Coalcliff Lodge likewise demanded

...that they [the Federal Labor Government] discard their garb of strict neutrality and utilise every means in their power with the object of driving

¹Ibid., 18 December 1929.
²Ibid.
³Ibid.
⁴Ibid.
⁵Sydney Morning Herald, 18 December 1929.
⁶Labor Daily, 18 December 1929.
the scabs from Rothbury and forcing the mineowners to re-open the mines upon pre-stoppage conditions.\(^1\)

Lowden, Sweeney and other southern district officials were embarrassed by the belligerence of the protests and though requesting more action from the Federal Government took care to modify the censure in their public statements.\(^2\)

Throughout the Christmas holiday period representatives of the northern district MMM stumped the southern coalfield urging support for an immediate general strike confident in the belief that a stoppage of six weeks would compel the Federal Government to intervene and nationalise the mines.\(^3\)

Strike advocates were now speaking to an audience more inclined to accept some of their conclusions. Excelsior miners, after hearing northern militants, decided not to return to work on 6 January.\(^4\) Old Bulli workers voted by 211 to thirty-three to cease work while Corrimal miners agreed, though with some hesitation, to endorse the strike proposals.\(^5\)

Lowden, previously unyielding in his support for non-extension declared that the 'psychological moment'\(^6\) for strike action had arrived. Miners in the smaller southern mines which had only belatedly begun to regain lost trade favoured a twenty per cent levy.\(^7\) At a special delegate board meeting summoned to consider the general strike Excelsior miners moved that the Federal Council sanction an 'immediate all out'.\(^8\) The proposal was lost by a 'substantial margin'\(^9\) though there was general support for a motion threatening a strike at some later and unspecified time.

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\(^1\) *Illawarra Mercury*, 27 December 1929.

\(^2\) Ibid.

\(^3\) *Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 January 1930.

\(^4\) Ibid., 8 January 1930.

\(^5\) Ibid.

\(^6\) *Illawarra Mercury*, 10 January 1930.

\(^7\) *Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 January 1930.

\(^8\) Ibid.

\(^9\) Ibid.
Strike action had only limited possibilities. To reap full advantage of their fortuitous market monopoly southern coal proprietors were anxious to avoid stoppages. Indeed, such was their anxiety that they offered miners bonus payments for strike-free performances and sought to suspend the customary Christmas holiday break. In these circumstances the threat of a strike would appear to be a viable alternative. But lack of competition since the beginning of the northern lockout had merely allowed recovery, not expansion. For many of the smaller mines the upswing in trade came too late. In April 1929 the Bellambi Coal Company declared they could find no buyers for coal on hand and returned £200,000, or half its paid up capital, to shareholders. The following month it was rumoured that the South Kembla mine was to go into liquidation and miners complained that the company was three weeks in arrears with wages. Mining operations ceased in May but there was no immediate liquidation. An attempted restart in June proved abortive and the company finally went into receivership in September. Further, the Bulli Colliery and Cokeworks, which had operated at a loss to shareholders since 1926, estimated a deficit of £270 for the financial year ending 31 December 1929.

The court wrangles continued until March 1930 and the position of northern miners worsened further when the State Government stopped all unemployment relief on the northern coalfields. Southern militants continued to call for a general strike but on 3 May the Central Council of the Miners' Federation decided to order a return to work in the north to avert inevitable defeat. To many Wollongong district miners

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1 *Illawarra Mercury*, 29 November 1929.

2 Ibid., 5 April 1929.

3 Ibid., 24 May 1929.

4 Ibid., 22, 29 November 1929.

5 *South Coast Times*, 5 April 1930.

6 CCM, 3 May 1930.
of militant sympathies capitulation could have been avoided by an 'all out' policy.

The federation's policy of non-extension allowed greater earnings by southern miners, but weakened still further their bargaining position on matters affecting working conditions. To minimise the danger of gas and coal dust explosions the Mines Department, following American precedent, introduced compulsory stone dusting in mines subject to dangerous gas concentration.¹ Miners objected and argued that while the practice could be an effective safeguard against explosion it was in itself a health hazard and contributed to the increasing number of lung disorders common among older miners.² Moreover, local miners so affected could not claim compensation under the Silicosis Act which applied only to the county of Cumberland. Medical opinion was divided on the question but investigations in Wales³ tended to support the miners' claims and consequently in June 1929, the southern delegate board instructed miners to refuse to carry out stone dusting.⁴ The following month two South Kembla miners were dismissed for implementing the ban. The colliery manager, A.E. Sellors, was adamant; failure to accept stone dusting would be met by a closure of the mine. The Illawarra Mercury decried the apparent intransigence of both sides and foretold a lengthy strike.⁵ The prediction was based on past performance rather than current trends for southern officials had shown themselves to be wedded to the idea of non-extension. By confining the strike to the north massive wage-cuts might be avoided. A stoppage in the south could only serve to jeopardise this aim.

¹Mines Report, 1928, pp.69-70.

²Illawarra Mercury, 7 May 1929.

³S. Lyle Cummins, Coal Dust & Stone Dust And its Effects on the Health of the Workers, n.d. (South Coast Times Print, Wollongong), passim.

⁴Illawarra Mercury, 14 June 1929.

⁵Sydney Morning Herald, 8 July 1929; Illawarra Mercury, 12 July 1929.
Not surprisingly the delegate board reversed its earlier decision and rather than disrupt the flow of money to distressed northern miners withdrew the ban on stone dusting. Similarly disputes over payments for men working behind coal cutting machines at Coalcliff were dampened and lodge officials were powerless to prevent owners employing newcomers to the district to replace absentees or men on compensation.

The 1920s was a decade of declining and uncertain markets for the southern coal industry relieved only by a fortuitous revival at its close. To some extent, however, the collapse of the coal industry was offset by the expansion of secondary industry. Before World War I, despite its coastal location and proximity to major coal measures, the Wollongong-Port Kembla district had scarcely been affected by industrialisation. Throughout the nineteenth century the lack of adequate shipping facilities retarded industrial growth. Small jetties at Coalcliff, Bulli and Wollongong offered poor berthing depths, only limited protection in other than calm weather and were incapable, except at considerable expense, of enlargement. This handicap had been acknowledged in 1897 when a parliamentary committee recommended the construction of a deep-sea harbour at Port Kembla in the belief that proximity to a major coalfield, a strategic market location between the two major centres of population (Sydney and Melbourne) and the availability of cheap land would attract industry to the district.

The Electrolytic Refining and Smelting Company (ER & S) agreed fully with the committee's assessment, and in 1907, 

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1 Sydney Morning Herald, 15 July 1929.
2 Illawarra Mercury, 22, 20 November 1929.
four years after the initial harbour construction was completed, began preparations for the establishment of a copper smelting plant near the new port. Though possessing no general advantage over Newcastle in proximity to copper supplies (at Mt Morgan and Cloncurry in Queensland; Mt Lyell in Tasmania; and Cobar, Mt Hope and Mt Royal in South Australia) Port Kembla was nevertheless closer to Sydney and Melbourne markets. Moreover, land prices at Port Kembla were low and as there was no industry in the district the company hoped that coal owners would welcome a home market and supply at relatively cheap rates the coal to generate electricity for the purpose of refining the copper anodes. 1

The refinery made steady if unspectacular progress until the outbreak of war in 1914 when the Federal Government became alarmed at the inability of the existing base-metal industry, which was vital to the production of munitions, to meet the emergency conditions. Government concern intensified when it became clear that the entire base-metals market was controlled by a small group of German firms working closely together. They maintained their hold by means of long-term contracts as was customary in view of the large outlay involved in smelting works and the importance of continuity of supply. One-third of the shares in the Port Kembla refinery were held by Aaron Hirsch and Son of Frankfurt-on-Main who, until war began, had purchased the larger share of the refined copper. 2 To free the copper, lead and zinc industries from German control, the Federal Government in May 1916 passed the Trading with the Enemy Act, and pushed all three readings of the Enemy Contracts Annulment Act through the House of Representatives in one day. 3 The latter Act allowed any party to a contract with a firm owned or controlled by enemy citizens to file it with

1 Electrolytic Refinery and Smelting Company Directors Minute Books, December 1907.


3 CPP, LXXVI 2884 (IR), 2955-3249 (2R), 3308 (3R).
the Attorney General for declaration as an enemy contract, whereupon it would be cancelled. But uncertainty as to the effectiveness of the Act and a reluctance to surrender long-term German contracts led ER & S and other base-metal interests to hesitate before complying with the Act. W.M. Hughes, the Attorney-General, eventually wrung compliance from the Port Kembla works by threatening to declare it an enemy company.\footnote{Ellis, Metal Manufactures, p.10.} The show of strength had the desired effect and the Port Kembla company submitted its foreign contracts for annulment.

The way was now clear for the Government to completely reorganise the Australian metal industries. The first step was the creation of the Australian Metal Exchange. Export of any metals other than gold or silver, except through a member of the exchange was prohibited under the wartime controls. The Government encouraged the formation of new companies to take over and enlarge existing works to process the copper and lead produced in the Commonwealth. The establishment of Metal Manufactures for the fabrication of brass, wire, telephone cables, tubes, plates and alloys was part of this activity deliberately encouraged by the government. The new plant was built alongside the Port Kembla refinery from which it obtained its copper supplies. Production commenced in April 1918 and the first order was received the following month.\footnote{Metal Manufactures Annual Reports 1919; Ellis, Metal Manufactures, p.22.}

During the manufacturing company's early trading years demand for its products remained constantly high. The extended use of electricity was one of the outstanding developments of the 1920s, a decade which saw a large-scale conversion in Australia of lighting, of machinery, and of household appliances to electric power. Of greatest benefit to Metal Manufactures was the extension of telephone services. In 1919 there were 2,256 telephone exchanges in Australia but by 1927 the number had risen to 5,482.\footnote{Ibid.} With
increased government expenditure in this sphere Metal Manufactures' financial position was secure for there was some sort of undertaking that the Postmaster-General's Department would purchase all its cable requirements from the company. It appears that Hughes promised the firm in 1916 a ten-year monopoly of Commonwealth cable requirements.¹ Tenders for contracts with the Postmaster-General's Department were required to state the country of origin of the copper and preference was given to those manufacturers using Australian copper.² In 1920 this preference system worked in the following way: the price per ton of copper wire was calculated by taking the price of electrolytic copper in London and adding £57 10s for the Port Kembla manufacturing cost.³ At this time, the manufacturing cost in Britain and America was about £35 per ton.⁴ Protection was formalised in the Greene Tariff of 1921.

Preference in government contracts, tariff protection and the expanding demands of the electrical industry thus ensured a rapid expansion in the company's output. In 1925 production of wire reached 8,000 tons and, with 3,000 tons of cable and slightly less than 1,000 tons of tube, total production was close to 12,000 tons.⁵ The 1925 output was, however, not repeated in the succeeding three years. Expansion gave way to the enforced idleness of much of the plant and the labour force. In 1926 orders from the General Post Office fell drastically. To some extent demand up until 1925 had been abnormal and associated with the setback to public utilities during the war. By 1925 supply had caught

¹Commonwealth Stores Supply and Tender Board (C.P. 370, Series 4), Business Paper, Meeting, 25 January 1921, p.3.
²Ibid., pp.2-3.
⁴Ibid.
⁵Metal Manufactures Annual Reports, 1926.
up with demand. Moreover the intensity of import competition increased sharply. Despite a thirteen per cent increase in the British Preferential Tariff between 1924-5 and 1928-9 (and a similar increase in the general tariff), manufacturing profits were eroded as a result of the steep fall in import prices and the failure of domestic costs to move in sympathy.¹ Whatever the reason for the diminishing orders the result was a decline in the overall production of wire and cables by 2,500 tons compared with the previous year.² The following year output was less than that for 1923.

Employment figures varied with production. In the first year of operation the company employed a work-force of 100.³ By 1925, the peak production year, the number of employed increased to 800.⁴ In the following eighteen months this figure dropped back to 600 and sections of the work-force experienced intermittency as parts of the plant closed for periods of up to two months.⁵ Worst hit was the telephone cable department which ceased production in November 1926 and did not restart until the following January.⁶ An expansion of the tube factory's output allowed the company to operate until mid-1930 without further reduction in the number employed.⁷

The decline in copper manufacturing was reflected in severely reduced activity at the smelting works. Wartime demand had forced the price of copper up to £108 per ton and

¹Ibid., p.24. See also C.B. Schedvin, Australia and the Great Depression (Sydney, 1970), pp.53-6.
²Estimate from graphs published in Metal Manufactures Gazette, June 1939, p.11. See Appendix B: Production at Metal Manufactures, 1927-1936, p.342.
³See Appendix C: Metal Manufactures Limited Average Annual Number of Employees, 1919-1944, p.343.
⁴Ibid.
⁵Metal Manufactures Directors Reports, 1927; Illawarra Mercury, 12 January 1927.
⁶Ibid.
⁷Metal Manufactures Gazette, June 1939, p.11.
the company prospered. In 1918 production reached its peak figure of 23,058 tons.\(^1\) Between 1918 and 1923, however, the value of Australian copper prices fell by eighty per cent following the collapse of copper prices in the world market. In the six years after the war the price of copper was halved, the sharpest fall occurring between 1920 and 1921 when the average price fell from £110 to £75 per ton.\(^2\) This decline in price was accompanied by the exhaustion of Australian copper deposits. From 1911 onwards ER & S obtained its blister-copper from an associate the Mt Lyell Company. When Australian copper supplies dried up the Port Kembla works were kept alive by the refining of Mt Lyell copper.\(^3\) To avoid the expense of refining at Port Kembla, the Tasmanian company, however, established their own refinery. In 1928 the new refinery drew the first cathode of copper from the precipitation tank and thereafter the Port Kembla plant became little more than a ghost refinery confined in the main to melting down sheets of Tasmanian cathode copper wire into bars for use by Metal Manufactures.\(^4\)

The late 1920s offered a bleak prospect for Wollongong workers. The future seemed to be linked with a wasting mineral asset in diminishing demand. The decision of Hoskins Ltd, to transfer their iron and steel plant from Lithgow to Port Kembla was therefore hailed as an augury of better times. The Wollongong Chamber of Commerce hopefully predicted the birth of 'a new Birmingham'\(^5\) on the south coast. Wollongong

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\(^1\) Ellis, *Metal Manufactures*, p.4.

\(^2\) Mines Department Reports, 1921-2.

\(^3\) Electrolytic Refining and Smelting Directors Minutes, 1928; see also Geoffrey Blainey, *The Peaks of Lyell* (Sydney, 1954), pp.260-1.


\(^5\) Illawarra Mercury, 7 March 1928.
would cease to be a rural-mining service centre and become the nucleus of a 'steeltown'. Coalminers working short-time were gratified at the prospect of the fuller pay packets of 'a high wage industry'. Both expectations appeared on the surface to be well grounded.

Hoskins, though no match for BHP, were an important producer of iron and steel. Their pig-iron production in 1920 reached 120,000 tons. In terms of steel Hoskins were relatively less significant and from 1923-4 their steel output figures averaged about 55,000 tons or between one-quarter to one-seventh of BHP's production. The firm employed between 1,500 and 3,000 men. Net profits for the period 1921-5 averaged £92,000 per annum, and total assets were valued at £2m. However, as Merritt suggests, reasonable profits did not blind Hoskins to the problems of the Lithgow site: the iron ore reserves in western New South Wales, on which the firm relied, were almost exhausted; Lithgow coal was unsatisfactory and had to be mixed with coastal coal to obtain a satisfactory coke; freight costs on both raw materials and finished products were becoming a serious handicap; and the plant had been badly planned and could not be regarded as an integrated iron and steel works. In 1924 Hoskins purchased 400 acres of land at Port Kembla which, with a deep-water harbour and proximity to the company's coke works at Wongawilli and limestone deposits some sixty-seven miles inland at Marulan, seemed likely to improve their competitive position.

1 South Coast Times, 14 April 1928.
2 Illawarra Mercury, 7 March 1928.
3 Prospectus of Hoskins Iron & Steel Co. Ltd, 1926, p.3.
4 Hoskins Iron and Steel Co. Ltd. (a company brochure, 1925), p.15.
6 Sir Cecil Hoskins, The Hoskins Saga (Sydney, 1969), pp.88-112. The land was originally part of the W.C. Wentworth estate.
However, there were considerable difficulties. The New South Wales government had to be convinced that the construction of a railway line from Port Kembla inland to Marulan, involving a climb of 2,000 feet over the Illawarra scarp, was an economic proposition. The undeveloped Port Kembla site was swampy and required drainage, the harbour needed dredging and wharves and jetties had to be built. In 1923 Charles Hoskins, managing director of the company, persuaded the New South Wales Parliamentary Standing Committee on Public Works that the railway line to Moss Vale would justify the estimated expenditure of £854,024. The government accepted Hoskins' argument that the railways would earn £100,000 in freight charges in the first year of operation with increasing amounts in succeeding years but required a guarantee that the works would be in progress before the line was started.

The construction of the new steel plant proved to be beyond the company's resources and Hoskins began negotiations with Dorman Long and Co. Ltd, a large British Steel firm with engineering branches in Australia, Baldwins Ltd, another British steel firm and Howard Smith Ltd, shipowners and coal merchants of Melbourne. In 1928 a new company, Australian Iron and Steel Ltd (AIS), was formed. This was an important development both in the iron and steel industry and for the district. Here was a new company with a good site backed by four experienced firms. Yet the strange nature of the merger

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1 See Parliamentary Standing Committee on Public Works. Report with Minutes of Evidence, Appendices and Plan Relating to the Proposed Railway from Moss Vale to Port Kembla, PP (NSW) 1923, Vol.111, p.445. Also Moss Vale to Port Kembla Railway Act (No. 63 of 1924) and Moss Vale to Port Kembla Railway Ratification Act (No. 21 of 1927).

2 Ibid.
The Port Kembla steelworks and surroundings, 1928. No. 1 blast furnace is in the left foreground. North of Tom Thumb Lagoon (centre) is the township of Wollongong.

A section of the construction site at Port Kembla. Foundations for the No. 1 open-hearth furnace, 1929.
caused much comment. No new capital was provided by the new partners. Dorman Long brought into the new company its assets in Australia, principally engineering shops in Melbourne and Sydney but excluding its Sydney Harbour Bridge contract. For these assets they received £195,536 in cash and 203,500 in ordinary shares plus the transfer from the Hoskins' family of 396,000 ordinary shares. Thus Dorman Long received £396,400 for goodwill and the use of its research results and selling agency in Australia. Baldwin's Ltd, provided a heavy steel rolling mill for which it received 100,000 ordinary shares and £68,000 in cash. Howard Smith, which was to be the shipping and selling agency of the new business, took up 350,000 ordinary shares for cash and was given a further 50,000 by the Hoskins family.

Undercapitalised from the outset, the firm ran into financial difficulties almost immediately. The cost of mining iron ore leases obtained on Cockatoo Island and Koolan Islands in the Yampi Sound proved prohibitive and in July 1928 AIS was forced to negotiate a ten-year contract for iron ore supplies with its competitor, BHP. Until the company's battery by-product ovens were completed coke had to be purchased at a higher cost. These problems were compounded by the sheer difficulty of transporting plant from Lithgow to Port Kembla, and by costly mistakes in construction

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1Hoskins brought into the new venture all its assets which had a net tangible value of £2,215,131 on 30 November 1927 and for these received £1,771,400 in £1 shares and 325,000 preference shares and balance in ordinary shares. The preference shares were for the preference shareholders in the old company and the 1,446,400 ordinary shares were for the Hoskins' family of which 396,400 were given to Howard Smith and 50,000 to Dorman Long. This transfer of shares, was the extraordinary feature of the transaction. It seems clear that these payments to Dorman Long and Howard Smith were for their goodwill. See Colin Forster, Industrial Development in Australia 1920-1930 (Canberra, 1964), pp.138-9; Melbourne Herald, 24 May 1928.

2 Forster, Industrial Development, p.139.

3 Ibid.

and planning. Hundreds of tons of cement left uncovered became unusable after rain and had to be blasted from the ground. A rolling mill built on inadequate supports began to sink. Worse still, the sharp fall in demand for steel came just at the time when the transfer of men and equipment began in earnest and it was found more profitable to continue steel production at Lithgow until 1930.¹

The construction of the steelworks at Port Kembla marks the emergence of Wollongong as an important non-metropolitan industrial centre. After 1928 the dominant social, political and economic forces were essentially the products of an increasingly urban-industrial environment and society's efforts to come to terms with that environment. There were contradictions in the initial responses of the Wollongong community to the changing nature of local society. Most workers welcomed new opportunities of employment, but some spoke out against the 'evils of industrial society and industrial capitalism'.² All businessmen were pleased by the prospect of increased trade. Rural property owners were gratified by soaring land prices but they had misgivings about the introduction of a new and rowdy element to the industrial work-force which would alter the nature of existing society. The depression struck before these contradictions and hesitations could be resolved. The Wollongong community was, therefore, confronted with the difficult task of coping with the problems of a new industrial society amidst economic collapse.

The most obvious change to accompany industrial growth was an expansion of the district's population from 32,381 in 1921 to 42,853 in 1933,³ an increase of thirty-two per cent.

¹Forster, Industrial Development, p.139.
²Illawarra Mercury, 27 June 1930.
³Census, Commonwealth of Australia, 1921, 1933.
compared with an increase of twenty-one per cent for the country as a whole. The increase was greatest in the township of Wollongong (sixty-nine per cent) and in the industrial sector of Central Illawarra (fifty-seven per cent).\(^1\) The population of the mining villages and rural areas increased relatively little; the shire of Bulli registered a net loss of males in the intercensal period.\(^2\) Some, seeing no future in the pit-top communities, moved closer to the growing industrial area at Port Kembla. Yet it was external not internal migration which provided the increased pool of industrial workers required in the district. Between 1921 and 1933 there was a net growth by migration of 5,540.\(^3\) The copper industry attracted out of work copper miners from Mt Morgan in Queensland; Hoskins transferred several hundred men from their Lithgow plant to Port Kembla. But in the main immigrants came from other parts of New South Wales. Thousands of Sydney unemployed sought work at the steelworks.

This flow of immigrants emphasises the scarcity of work throughout Australia in the latter 1920s. The majority of newcomers were unskilled migratory workers looking for employment as construction labourers at the Port Kembla steelworks. Their arrival increased the predominance of Wollongong society and permanently altered the population structure. According to the 1921 census males outnumbered females in almost every age group; in aggregate there were 16,847 men and 15,634 women - or a four per cent surplus of males. By 1933 the male surplus had increased to six per cent. Change was greatest in Central Illawarra where, by 1933, fifty-five per cent of the population were males. The imbalance, which was most marked in the twenty to twenty-nine

\(^1\) See Appendix D: Population Change in Wollongong, 1921-1933 (Figure 1), p.344.

\(^2\) Ibid. (Figure 2), pp.345-8.

\(^3\) This figure was calculated by using the vital statistics method. The long period between available census figures (1921 to 1933) rendered the use of life tables difficult if not impossible. Ibid. (Figures 2 and 3), pp.345-50.
age group, emphasises the fact that most migrants were young men in search of work.¹

Port Kembla was unprepared for the flow of migrants that occurred in the 1920s and the lack of planning associated with the birth of the industrial town influenced the environment of working-class life, for at least a further generation. It was, as Bernard Barrett has written of a similar industrial area, 'crippled from birth'.² The central problem was a lack of housing. As early as 1909 Metal Manufactures acknowledged the housing shortage and purchased homes from nearby areas and transported them to Port Kembla. The company later built thirty-eight houses for officials and employees and discussed with the Port Kembla Traders' Association the possibility of a municipal housing scheme. But such piecemeal efforts brought little relief.³

Shortage encouraged improvisation, squatting on crown land, and makeshift dwellings. In 1927 the Municipality of Central Illawarra made a determined effort to stamp out temporary camps at Port Kembla.⁴ Twenty-one demolition orders were executed but a further seventy-two humpies remained.⁵ Even the more permanent structures were little more than huts of about 400 square feet divided into two units and occupied by as many as thirteen people. In their original state these rough structures lacked lining, had a canvas ceiling and were open at the eaves and gables. It

¹Ibid. (Figure 2), pp.345-8.

²Bernard Barrett, The Inner Suburbs: the evolution of an industrial area (Melbourne, 1971), p.3. Barrett argues that many Australian industrial or slum areas are not so much the result of the gradual decay of originally fashionable suburbs as areas which were spoilt from the outset.

³Metal Manufactures Gazette, June 1939, pp.25 and 42; Metal Manufactures' Directors Minutes, 16 September 1924, 14 October 1924, 11 October 1928; Illawarra Mercury, 12 July 1928, 10 August 1928.

⁴Municipality of Central Illawarra Minute Books, 13 April 1927.

⁵Ibid., 9 April 1927.
was common to find in them a central room with a fire place, used as a general living room and kitchen, with roughly hewn partitions dividing the remainder into bedrooms.

Housing scarcity and improvisation was compounded by poor surroundings. North and south of the settlement were two stretches of water; Tom Thumb Lagoon and Lake Illawarra. Both were shallow and their low lying shores swampy. To avoid the unhealthy margins early housing had hugged the higher ground. Newcomers in the 1920s were left with the swampy and damp lower ground. Already unhealthy conditions were exacerbated by primitive sanitary provisions. Grease traps constructed to receive bath water were too small and frequently overflowed forming foul smelling bogs and breeding grounds for rats. Open drains from the longer established hill top dwellings took their natural course down the slopes and through the yards of houses below, and spilled across footpaths. The flats became, on the admission of local health authorities, 'unfit for human habitation'. An open drain which traversed half the settled area carrying waste drainage from the south east portion of Port Kembla to the sea frequently silted up with sand or debris and waste water ran across the streets creating further bogs. Effluent from the septic tanks of local hotels flowed directly into an open storm-water drain.

These insanitary conditions brought disease. In the summer of 1928 there were seven cases of typhoid fever noted at Port Kembla and a more widespread epidemic was feared. Yet only the most crude remedial action was taken; liberal quantities of disinfectant were bucketed into hollows surrounding the main drain.

Lack of habitable housing coupled with sanitary neglect diverted industrial workers to Wollongong and the northern mining villages in search of accommodation. Here too

1Ibid., 9 July 1930.
2Ibid.
3Ibid., 11 December 1928.
squatting on public or private land pre-dated the depression and the growth of secondary industry. Throughout the 1920s rudimentary galvanised iron and earthern-floored huts were erected along creek banks on the bush slopes above the Coledale railway. These bush squatters were too poor to afford any sort of legal tenancy and latecomers were usually in an even worse condition.¹

Shire officials had previously ignored the rate-evading squatters though, as their number increased, there was less toleration. A survey of illegal dwellings by the shire council in 1929 revealed insanitary conditions, sub-letting and over-crowding. It was alleged that a desire to evade local government liabilities rather than poverty explained the growing humpy settlements.² The report instanced a married couple with nine children and a permanent boarder sharing two rooms and a closed verandah. Three of the occupants were in constant work.³

Local government authorities were unprepared for the industrial growth of the 1920s; none more so than the municipality of Central Illawarra where administrative resources and methods were more suited to a nineteenth century rural community than to a growing industrial area. For thirty-eight years the business of local government had been in the hands of town clerk, G. (George) Lindsay. Though Lindsay was a capable man, his business methods relied more on good memory and local knowledge than on conventional office practice. The rapid changes of the 1920s demanded more sophisticated procedures. The council's administration was by 1928 in a state of chaos; correspondence was unfiled, contract accounts were eighteen months behind, rate demands unissued and money banked in wrong accounts. Rate liabilities were impossible to estimate for receipts had not been issued. Moreover, the council's affairs were complicated by the problem of title. Though there had been

¹Bulli Shire Minute Books, 2 April 1928.
²Ibid., 6 June 1929.
³Ibid.
considerable land speculation, large areas purchased by speculators had reverted to the original owners. In numerous instances allotments purchased from subdividers were forfeited. Still other would-be land purchasers were struggling to meet payments to subdividers and were simply unable to pay rates. In these circumstances rate collection was always difficult, if not often impossible. Fifty per cent of rates for the 1928 financial year were written off and by October 1929 the council was within a few pounds of its overdraft limit and could not pay accumulated accounts. Local government organisation had broken down. In July 1929 the New South Wales Local Government Department investigated the administrative crisis in Central Illawarra. The department concluded that council staff was unable to cope with the demands of a growing municipality.

Inefficiency, neglect and overwork all help explain the disorder that existed. A 'pick and shovel' policy was put forward in 1929 by W.J. Macken as a solution to the council's difficulties. Macken, a brash university-trained replacement for Lindsay, urged stringent economy and in a thirteen page report outlined a plan to improve administration and balance the budget. Solvency would, he estimated, take three years to attain. The depression did not cause a decrease in local government work; the number of rate assessments remained constant; the requirements of the Local Government Act did not alter; correspondence increased as rate reminders multiplied with ratepayers hunting for work changing their addresses and purchasers of land on time-payment frequently forfeiting their rights without the knowledge of the council and still others paying by instalments. Macken's programme was simple. Retrenchment would cull out the

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1Municipality of Central Illawarra Minute Books, 4 October 1929.
2Ibid., 8 July 1929.
3Ibid., 6 December 1929.
4Ibid.
inefficient workmen and a modernised office routine would produce better and cheaper administration.¹

The council decided to accept Macken's proposals. Some male clerical assistants were dismissed, others were replaced by junior females and still others were downgraded. Reforms in office management, however, often simply increased the work-load for permanent professional and semi-professional staff: the engineer left his drawing board to process rate demands; the health inspector delivered routine messages and paid out wages to the council's outside staff.² Constant supervision was the touchstone of Macken's policy as it affected workmen. Without supervision he declared 'it was left to the individual employee to yield the council's interest'.³

The establishment of an iron and steel plant at Port Kembla and the anticipated industrial development exposed also the inadequacy of local trade union organisation among skilled tradesmen and unskilled workers alike. The typical union for skilled workers such as boilermakers, engineers, bricklayers and carpenters consisted of a small sub-branch with no paid officials, and visited monthly by organisers from Sydney. The same was true for the unskilled labourers in the copper industries. The Australian Workers' Union (AWU) had preference in the awards of both companies, but local organisation was weak. F.H. (Fred) Finch, secretary of the Port Kembla branch, was employed full time at Metal Manufactures and had little time to devote to organising labourers at the steelworks.⁴ Co-ordination of union activity was difficult in such circumstances and in June 1926 the Wollongong ALP branch, aware that a flood of non-union labour

¹Ibid.
²Ibid., 2 December 1929.
³Ibid., 6 December 1929.
⁴Interview with Mr F.H. Finch, 10 August 1971.
could further undermine the bargaining power of local workers, had attempted to establish a trades and labor council. ¹ The support of the coalminers was essential to the council's success and, even after the formation of a council in 1928, lodges were slow to offer their support. ² Their attitude to the coming of iron and steel was somewhat ambivalent. They hoped that the development of new industries would provide alternative employment but were reluctant to support the new body fearing that their freedom of action could be thereby restricted. Yet events both local and national were conspiring to break down the separatist attitude of the miners.

The actions of the Nationalist Government, with S.M. Bruce as Prime Minister, seemed to provide evidence that a determined effort was being made to curtail union freedom and prepare the way for wage-cuts. In November 1925 Bruce won an election on a platform which included a 'law and order' programme. Bruce introduced a Crimes Act which declared revolutionary and seditious associations unlawful and strengthened the Commonwealth Government's hand for dealing with strikes and strikers in industries affecting trade, commerce and Commonwealth public services. ³ Moreover, in April 1926, the High Court brought down a decision establishing the priority of Commonwealth awards over state legislation ⁴ and a month later Bruce announced that he would seek increased industrial powers for the Commonwealth parliament. The defeat of this proposal at a subsequent referendum seemed only to strengthen Bruce's belief in the need for a strong Federal Court. Subsequently, in June 1926,

¹ New South Wales Trades and Labor Council Minutes, 3 June 1926.

² Coledale Lodge Minutes, 22 June and 28 July 1926.


⁴ Cowburn's Case, 37 Commonwealth Law Reports, p.466ff. See also G. Sawer, op.cit., pp.292-3.
Parliament passed an amending act reconstituting the court and giving its judges tenure for life, thereby enabling them to resist external pressure in their decisions and awards. The most critical step, however, came in December 1927 when the Attorney-General, J.G. Latham, introduced a further amending bill designed to extend conciliatory activities, reduce overlapping between Federal and State awards and deter strikes. The bill envisaged a court empowered to approve lockouts in industries where there were sectional strikes, order secret ballots for union elections if asked to do so by ten members, refer the issues involved in industrial disputes to secret ballots, and disallow union rules if it judged them oppressive or restrictive. For their part federal unions were to be held responsible for the actions of branch officials and made liable for penalties imposed during strikes. Picketing was to be severely limited and the bill also proposed that the Arbitration Court should consider, except where the basic wage was concerned, the probable economic effect of its decisions on the community in general and upon the industry concerned. ¹

Labour leaders throughout Australia reacted sharply to these proposals which in their view constituted a deliberate attack on unionism. Wollongong trade union officials were conscious of the need to co-ordinate local union organisation to meet this challenge. The failure of the new steelworks to absorb out-of-work coalminers, and the continued influx of men drawn to Port Kembla by real estate agents' extravagant estimates of the company's need for labour emphasised the need for action. Always conscious of labour costs Hoskins was hostile towards unions. Working conditions at the Lithgow plant were uniformly bad and the works gained a reputation as a bloodhouse. ² The decision to transfer as many of the


²Letters of Mr C. Tannock (President of the Sydney branch of the Federated Ironworkers' Association 1924-6; Secretary of FIA 1926-46, and President 1953-5). I am indebted to Dr J.A. Merritt for allowing me to use and cite his correspondence with Mr Tannock.
Lithgow employees as possible to Port Kembla ensured that the bitter industrial relations would continue at the new site. Union organisers were refused entry to the construction area.\(^1\) Moreover, with hundreds seeking labouring work at the plant gates each day, Hoskins was able to dispense with troublesome workers and employ non-union labour. With the formation of AIS Hoskins applied to the Federal Arbitration Court and the New South Wales Industrial Commission for award variations. Workers alleged that the company was launching an attack on the basic wage standard and attempting to establish industry awards.\(^2\)

Unions for more skilled workers were better able to protect their members. In May 1929 the Federated Ironworkers' Association (FIA) approved the formation of a new sub-branch at Port Kembla and in June an interim-executive was elected headed by the former Lithgow branch secretary, J. Ward. Aided by a subsidy from the association's federal council, the sub-branch made good progress and by November had doubled its initial membership of fifty.\(^3\) In January 1930 the Amalgamated Engineering Union (AEU) claimed one hundred financial members at the new plant.\(^4\) Nevertheless by the end of 1929 it was estimated that only thirty per cent of the workers at AIS were union members. The AWU had made little headway among navvies at the steelworks where, in late 1929 nearly 500 non-union labourers were employed.\(^5\)

In the absence of strong union organisation at the job level the Trades and Labor Council assumed a more important role. Rapidly deteriorating economic conditions made its task difficult at Port Kembla but the council made some progress with piecemeal attempts to extend unionism and to consolidate existing union strength throughout the remainder

\(^1\) Illawarra Mercury, 8 May 1929.

\(^2\) AEU, Monthly Reports, June 1928, p.8.

\(^3\) Illawarra Mercury, 22 November 1929.

\(^4\) AEU, Monthly Reports, January 1930.

\(^5\) Illawarra Mercury, 6 December 1929.
of the district. Efforts were made to encourage unionism among shop assistants\(^1\) and in 1929, a Building Trades Group was established.\(^2\) Late in 1929, the council could claim fourteen affiliated unions.\(^3\) In large degree this initial response was a reflection of uncertainty among workers and fear that wage reductions and unemployment would become more general. Indeed, the council came to be viewed by many as a relief dispensing organisation.

Two events, however, helped the Labor Council consolidate its position. In September 1928 the council supported and organised the Wollongong branch of the ALP's first major campaign in local politics and in the early months of 1929 initiated and led a strike by Wollongong and Port Kembla timberworkers. Growing unemployment throughout 1929 tended to make coalminers more aware of the influence which local authorities had over their livelihood. In the first place, municipal and shire councils decided to whom and on what conditions relief work would be granted. Moreover, the establishment of the Hoskins iron and steel plant led to a sharp rise in land values, and during 1928 a record number of 299 new buildings were erected in Wollongong.\(^4\) As growth within the municipality was expected to continue, prospective Labor councillors argued that unemployed workers should share this apparent prosperity. They advocated increased municipal borrowing to absorb local unemployment.\(^5\)

The nomination of Labor candidates drew shrill protests from press and public alike. Known Labor supporters condemned the introduction of political party warfare into the civic life of the community, and publicly declared their support for the Progressive candidates.\(^6\) J. Kelly, a sitting

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\(^1\) *South Coast Times*, 4 July 1929.

\(^2\) *Illawarra Mercury*, 13 December 1929.

\(^3\) Ibid.

\(^4\) Ibid., 7 December 1928.

\(^5\) Ibid.

\(^6\) Ibid.
councillor and Labor sympathiser, rejected overtures to accept Labor nomination and criticised the introduction of politics into municipal affairs.\(^1\) Labor candidates countered by declaring the Wollongong Municipal Council a 'one family civic show' which claimed to 'rule by divine right'.\(^2\) The sole qualification for membership of this 'closed clique', labour spokesmen alleged, was a long family connection with the district. Labor's challenge was a threat to 'antiquated ideas dammed in a lake of parochialism'.\(^3\)

Progressive candidates, saw their opponents as 'outsiders' with little 'take in the town who were trying 'to sweep in when there was a little prosperity about'.\(^4\) In defending their past record sitting members stressed long association with the town and contrasted their administrative and commercial acumen with their opponents' lack of business experience. They played on the fear of property holders by suggesting that a Labor council would increase rates to meet the high interest payments which would inevitably result from their rash borrowing.\(^5\) Investors would be frightened off and land values 'would plummet'.\(^6\) More positively, the Progressives advocated the raising of a £45,000 loan for road development but claimed that repayments would be met without increasing rates. All road works, councillors pledged, would employ day-labour and would not be contracted out. In this way the local unemployed could be given work at a minimum cost to ratepayers.\(^7\)

In the event the Labor ticket was rejected at the polls. In seeking to explain their failure defeated Labor candidates accused the existing councillors of having

\(^1\)Ibid.

\(^2\)Ibid., 14 December 1928.

\(^3\)South Coast Times, 7 December 1928.

\(^4\)Illawarra Mercury, 7 December 1928.

\(^5\)Ibid.

\(^6\)Ibid., 30 November 1928.

\(^7\)Ibid.
'manipulated' the voting regulations. The 1928 municipal elections were the first to be fought under the adult franchise and compulsory voting introduced by the Lang government. Whereas most councils had accepted enrolment on state and federal electoral rolls as a basis for local registers, the Wollongong Council demanded that all applications for enrolment be sworn before a Justice of the Peace. But the problem was less a matter of public regulation than of private attitude. The majority of the Wollongong workers, then as now, regarded local body elections as 'squabbles of little or no importance'.

The municipal election was barely over when timber workers throughout Australia ceased work in protest against the Lukin timber award. While attention in the Wollongong district centred almost exclusively on the coal crisis, elsewhere in Australia Labor was preoccupied with the timber strike. Justice Lukin's award of January 1929 put an end to the forty-four hour week city timber workers had enjoyed since almost all other unions had lost it in 1922-3. Consequently local workers along with most Labor supporters saw the award as a well chosen first step in a general attack on the shorter working week. Not only did the new award lengthen hours but it also cut wages and permitted the substitution of youths for adults. Basic rates and margins for skill were reduced by between 5s and 10s, reductions in wages of boy labourers in the bush section ranged from 16s to 20s and the permissible ratio throughout the industry of juvenile to adult labour was increased from one to eight to one to four. Moreover, the award provided for contract work and for piece-work or time bonus. These alternatives were held to permit 'speed-up', and to allow the by-passing of the unions.

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1 Ibid.
3 Illawarra Mercury, 14 December 1928.
The workers were not long in answering the virtual challenge contained in the new award. A strike began in Sydney on 31 January, when men were 'locked out' for refusing to observe the new award. It was not, however, until 15 March that Wollongong and Port Kembla timberyards closed. 1 Timberworkers in the district had for some time been working forty-eight hours for forty-eight hours pay, and were generally reluctant to strike. They did so only after much goading by the Sydney and Illawarra Trades and Labor Councils. 2 Wollongong timberworkers stated that they would continue to work forty-eight hours only if wages remained unchanged. 3 About forty-five men and five timberyards were affected by the stoppage.

From the outset the dispute was organised by the Illawarra Trades and Labor Council to which the timberworkers elected two delegates. To meet what it described as 'the onslaught of the owning class' and the 'anti-working class legislation' 4 of the Bruce Government the council established a series of local defence committees to relieve distress and publicise the nature of the crisis for workers. 5 Despite these efforts finance was rarely, if ever, adequate.

Coalminers, though now working better time, found the twelve and a half per cent levy for the northern miners crippling enough without contributing to a timberworkers' strike fund. The meagre financial support underlined the weakness of unionism in the district. S. (Steve) Best, organising secretary for the council and previously a Mt Kembla miner, complained that the 500 labourers at Port Kembla were contributing neither to the timberworkers' strike nor to locked-out northern miners. 6 Although mass demonstrations by pickets briefly improved morale and strengthened the

1 Sydney Morning Herald, 16 March 1929.
2 Illawarra Mercury, 16 March 1929.
3 Ibid.
4 Ibid., 7 April 1929.
5 Ibid.
6 Ibid.
solidarity of the strikers, it was clear that local timberworkers could not continue much longer. In September, when workers sought return, the timber trade was slack. Merchants were willing to re-employ workers only as business revived. While awaiting better times, workers could do little but seek work elsewhere or join the ranks of the 'new unemployed'. Though there were claims of victimisation, they were powerless to press their case.

The attempts by Wollongong trade union officials to co-ordinate labour organisation at Port Kembla were thwarted by the onset of depression. This is clearly demonstrated in the attempts of unions to assist the unemployed. Despite a ten per cent unemployment rate throughout the 1920s there was no planned policy to prevent unemployment and the poverty which accompanied it. In New South Wales the common method of meeting the needs of the jobless was through the haphazard allocation of relief work. In special cases of need relief rations were issued by the police.

Intermittency of employment was a common feature of Australian mining life in the 1920s; indeed it was almost constant in southern mining experience. In the absence of any substantial government assistance to the workers mine lodges established a network of relief committees throughout the southern district and placed an embargo on 'outsiders' gaining employment until all local miners were working full time. By 1926 however, when the Coledale colliery closed down, it became obvious that miners on short-time could not be reabsorbed by the coal industry and that alternative employment must be sought. Meanwhile, temporary employment was needed and mine officials adopted what had become a familiar expedient and requested relief work. Complete gangs of miners were employed throughout the district on road levelling. Initially men so employed considered themselves temporarily relocated coalminers and continued to pay

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1 *South Coast Times*, 10 June 1929.
3 *Coledale Lodge Minutes*, 22 July 1928.
financial contributions to the southern district fighting fund and the federal levy.¹ In some instances lodges made up the difference between relief pay and the basic wage. They endeavoured also to regulate conditions of employment, and fined workers who accepted work at weekends as farm or general labourers.²

By the early months of 1928, however, the scale of unemployment had increased to a point where lodges could no longer confidently expect relief work. More than 1,000 miners were out of work and a further 1,200 were working intermittently.³ Moreover, the pool of unemployed had increased, swelled by men arriving in the district from other parts of New South Wales and from Queensland and Victoria. Lodges made direct appeals to local government authorities and in March a public meeting was called by the Wollongong Council to examine the unemployment problem and to suggest remedies.

Trade union officials suggested that the jobless should be employed on the construction of the Moss Vale-Port Kembla railway line. Work had commenced in March 1927 with the clearing of an access road and it was estimated that 1,100 men would be required.⁴ But the nineteen miles of track to be laid between Mt Murray and Unanderra traversed a rise of over 2,000 feet through rough and heavily timbered country. The Railways Department, which had guaranteed Hoskins that the line would be complete by 1932, was already behind schedule and preferred, in the main, to employ experienced railwaymen or miners whose skills could be utilised in tunnelling work.⁵ Selection based on the possession of specific skills meant the abandonment of the 'rotary system'.⁶

¹Ibid., 22 June 1928.
²Ibid.
³Illawarra Mercury, 3 February 1928.
⁴Ibid.
⁵Ibid., 10 March 1928.
⁶Employment on relief work in order of registration at a Labour Exchange.
This, together with the sight of gangs of Sydney railway workers passing through Wollongong, increased local resentment. Spokesmen for the One Big Union of Unemployed protested and asked the unemployed not to accept work from the Main Roads Board until the board resumed its earlier practice and employed men in the order they had registered at the Wollongong Labour Exchange. The protests were ignored as there was no shortage of men looking for work. However, to avoid the possible harassment of its officials or of men given work, the board abandoned the customary 'pick-up' at the labour exchange. Thereafter, men were offered employment by letter.¹

When they had failed to secure railway construction work, the unemployed had no alternative but to clamour at council doors. Local municipal and shire councils were limited in the amount of relief work they could offer. They could seek Main Roads Board approval for further expenditure on thoroughfares which were part of the main roads network; they could raise loan money to step up their own works programme; or they could petition the Department of Labour and Industry for a direct grant to provide relief work. The Main Roads Board, however, was an early victim of government expenditure cuts. The board was established by the Main Roads Act (1924) to co-operate with local authorities in the maintenance and construction of main highways. It derived its finances from special taxes on motor vehicles and petrol sales, from a government grant to be not less than £115,000, from municipal and shire council contributions calculated at a halfpenny in the pound on the unimproved capital land value, and by parliamentary loan appropriation.² In 1928 the New South Wales Government withdrew the annual grant made from the Consolidated Revenue Fund and the regulations

¹Main Roads Board File, IE 28/58; Daily Guardian, 14 August 1928.

controlling the board's loan repayments were tightened. Moreover, country municipalities and shires were not as were their metropolitan counterparts, able to borrow and meet both interest and loan payments from Road Board funds.

The expansion of council activities was scarcely a realistic alternative. While the Wollongong Municipality benefited from a short-lived rise in land values which accompanied the arrival of the iron and steel industry, local body funds hardly ever rose above the irreducible minimum. In July 1929 the Department of Labour and Industry, deluged by requests for aid from local governments, refused to sanction further grants, although it was willing to continue providing loan money.

Throughout the early months of 1928 road work was the common lot of unemployed miners. In April the Main Roads Board offered to employ three hundred miners on road construction work at Nowra and Waterfall. Lodges were asked to provide the names of men, preferably married, in need of work. The preference shown coalminers drew protests from unemployed labourers at Port Kembla and prompted them to form a branch of the One Big Union of the Unemployed. The establishment of the union was, in large degree, the work of R. (Robert) Shayler, a Sydney-based communist who travelled south almost daily to organise Wollongong unemployed. His success emphasises the inadequate attempts of local trade union officials to assist the unemployed labourers of Port Kembla.

Shayler declared that the objective of the union was 'to organise the workers irrespective of colour, nationality or calling'. The union denounced preference given coalminers as 'a veiled attempt to divide the workers'. He asked local

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1 Newell, op.cit., February 1938, pp.60-1.
2 Bulli Shire Minute Books, 7 July 1928.
3 Illawarra Mercury, 13 April 1928.
4 Ibid.
5 Ibid.
miners to refuse the work offered. The southern district miners' secretary, J.T. Sweeney, countered by claiming that the efforts of miners' lodges were aimed at finding employment for all workers and alleged that many miners had refused to accept the work. But for most miners eighteen months' intermittency justified special treatment. Certainly they felt more deserving than 'newcomers' to the district who had experienced but five or six weeks without work.

After June 1928 requests to the Main Roads Board for further construction work were rejected and indications were that only maintenance work requiring few men would follow. From this point the unemployed made greater demands on local authorities. Local municipal and shire councils maintained small permanent staffs which they supplemented with casual labour for specific jobs. It was the rule that casual labourers, so employed, retained no priority once dismissed and councils were able to adopt the practice of taking on unemployed workers in these temporary positions. Yet humanitarianism was tempered by economic reality. The workless were offered casual labour in terms of a definite policy: to avoid payment of travelling costs men were to be given work as near to their homes as possible; efficient gangs were not to be split up merely to assist the absorption of the unemployed; and councils reserved the right to give preference to skilled men. Unemployed miners, many of whom had during the 1920s worked short periods as council labourers, were contemptuous of claims that council work required any skill whatever and demanded that local authorities step up their works programme and distribute available work to the unemployed. If money was short then councils should borrow. Funds were limited and councillors,

1 Ibid.
2 Ibid., 20 April 1928.
3 Buli Shire Minute Books, 24 June 1928.
4 Ibid., 25 July 1928.
5 Ibid.
6 Ibid., 4 August 1928.
chary of increasing borrowing, maintained that unless they were careful in their supervision ratepayers would not get value for money. Loan repayments could only be met by increased rates. Moreover, the Department of Labour and Industry required that seventy-five per cent (later eighty per cent) of loan money be spent on wages. This meant that local bodies were very cautious of raising such loans for developmental works which involved considerable expenditure on materials and equipment. Loans raised to assist the unemployed therefore tended to be for small amounts varying between £1,000 and £4,000 and were used to carry out work which had a high labour content such as gravelling roads or clearing drains. In December the Wollongong Municipal Council negotiated a £1,000 loan which it used to give three hundred men a week's road work before Christmas. Nevertheless the number of unemployed continued to grow. A Wollongong Labour Exchange spokesman claimed that thirty 'strangers' registered each day.

By the end of 1928 the outlook for unemployed workers was bleak. No new roadworks were planned as current works were coming to a close. For the first time, newspaper editorials commented on the grim prospects of workers facing the next Wollongong winter without work and called for public meetings to organise the collection of distress funds, blankets and clothing to supplement relief rations issued by the police. But with the partial recovery of the coal mines in April agitation for relief work waned. The unemployed union which emerged in 1928 had subsequently disintegrated as its members received relief work and with the miners working full-time the unemployed were disorganised and powerless. Their weak

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1 Municipality of Wollongong Minute Books, 7 December 1928.
2 Ibid., 21 December 1928 and Bulli Shire Minute Books, 7 December 1928.
3 Municipality of Wollongong Minute Books, 7 December 1928.
4 Illawarra Mercury, 14 January 1929.
position reflects the nature of Wollongong labour organisation and society in the late 1920s. They were part of the new industrial work-force which was neither fully accepted by the community nor adequately represented within the labour movement.
CHAPTER TWO

WORKERS AND THE DEPRESSION

It is conventional to date the depression from the international stock-market crash of 1929. For most Wollongong workers, however, 1929 was not a year of any particular significance. It was a year marked by subdued optimism rather than despair. Southern coalmines were busier than they had been at any time in the 1920s, and at Port Kembla a steelworks was gradually taking shape. Much was expected of the steelworks. Coalminers hoped that, when fully operative, the fuel required by the new plant would compensate for the eventual loss of the temporary market-advantage which the lockout of northern coalminers gave southern collieries. Shopkeepers and businessmen were confident that the influx of newcomers looking for work at Port Kembla would stimulate spending and provide the first real prosperity since the war. Consequently, if Wollongong workers associate the onset of depression with any single event it is the shutting down of blast-furnace 'Emily' at Easter-weekend 1930. As a result more than one thousand men were paid-off and, although many were re-employed shortly afterwards, the dismissals shattered the hopes of an entire community.

In real terms, however, the later and more gradual down-turn experienced by the coal industry had greater impact on the local economy. The output of the southern mining district fell from 2,258,808 tons in 1929 to 981,964 tons in

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1 See, for example, L.J. Louis and Ian Turner, The Depression of the 1930s (Melbourne, 1968), p.1.

2 Illawarra Mercury, 9 April 1930. The blast-furnace had been 'christened' the 'Emily' after Mrs Emily Hoskins, the widow of C.H. Hoskins (1851-1926), the founder of the family steel business. Mrs Hoskins performed the official lighting ceremony when the blast-furnace was blown-in on 28 August 1928. See Sir Cecil Hoskins, The Hoskins Saga, p.97.
1931. Production had not sunk so low since the 1890s. The northern lockout delayed the full impact of the depression on the southern field but by so doing served only to exacerbate the problem of overcapacity which had become acute in the late 1920s. Apart from a recovery in 1929, associated with the cessation of work in the north, the number of miners employed in the southern district declined annually from 5,293 in 1926 to 2,822 in 1933. During the latter year mines worked on average 231 days or 55 days more than in 1928. But in mid-1930 when the northern mines entered the market southern trade fell away dramatically. In June southern miners averaged only 11.8 days work per month and the year's average fell to 146.2 days. In the seven months following the return to work in the north, a total of 705 days were worked or an average of two days per week at each colliery. Average work days reached their lowest point the following year when mines operated for 122.5 days. The 1929 figure was not reached again until 1939 and not before close to half the work-force had been displaced.

Unlike coalmining districts in other countries faced with the same problems of overcapacity and reduced demand, New South Wales did not seek a solution in a system of output quotas as a means of maintaining prices by restricting supply. In consequence the price of coal fell from 19s a ton in 1928 to 15s 4d a ton in 1930, to 13s 8d in 1932 and to a rock bottom 1½s a ton in 1935. But even then prices failed to

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1Mines Department Reports, 1929-32. See Appendix E: Black Coal Production for Australian Coalfields, 1925-39, p.361.
2Ibid.
3See Chapter One, p.22.
4Calculated from Mines Department Reports. See Appendix G: Average Number of Days Worked per Month in the principal collieries of the Southern Coalfield, p.363.
5See Appendix F: The number of mines operating and men employed in southern collieries, 1926-38, p.362.
adjust output to demand. Capacity still vastly exceeded market requirements and the individual mining companies were too small to absorb such crippling blows. Yet despite the rapid deterioration of idle mines the number of collieries operating on the southern field remained stable between 1931 and 1936. It seems clear that during the depression mining companies survived on their past income and on enterprises other than the production of coal. Mines were kept open, in many cases, at substantial loss. Judge Drake-Brockman estimated the average loss in capital invested in coal production between 1931 and 1937 at three per cent.

While the number of mines remained constant ownership did not. Between 1931 and 1936 repeated losses on trading forced three collieries to sell out. Mt Keira and Bulli mines were purchased by AIS with an eye more to future expansion of the steel industry than in the hope of any immediate financial return. The South Kembla colliery which from 1927 had been struggling to pay wages and under continual threat of non-recognition by the Miners' Federation, was purchased by a group of Sydney trawling operators as an attempt to cut their own costs.

To say that the Australian coal industry operated under 'keenly competitive conditions' during the 1930s is an understatement; it was a classic illustration of cut-throat marketing. Local consumers - mainly the copper processing and manufacturing companies - played off one mine against the other in forcing down prices. ER & S resisted being drawn into long-term contracts for its coal supplies, preferring to

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2. Ibid., p.383.
3. See Appendix F: The number of mines operating and men employed in southern collieries, 1926-38, p.362.
4. Southern District Management Board Notes (DMB), 27 January 1932; W.J. Penrose to manager, South Kembla Colliery, 14 November 1932; Sydney Morning Herald, 8 February 1932.
5. Shaw, op.cit., p.60.
take advantage of what they termed 'irregular prices'. Annual government contracts for the supply of coal to railways and gas-works stimulated further price-cutting. Failure to win a government contract often meant a temporary closure for a struggling mine; the Mt Pleasant colliery ceased operations immediately its tender was rejected in August 1933, and after a similar failure Coalcliff temporarily closed the following year. Southern mines, especially the smaller pits, suffered disproportionately in this struggle for markets. Bunker coal sales continued to fall with declining international and coastal trade. Moreover, the inadequacy of the Port Kembla harbour meant a further loss of trade. Steamships prevented by heavy seas from berthing were frequently diverted to Newcastle for coal.

To keep their mines operating the coal companies cut expenses. Since labour constituted almost two-thirds of mine overhead owners compensated themselves for falling prices by reducing wages. In August 1930 southern collieries sought a reduction of fifteen per cent in the hewing rate and of 6d in day rates. They claimed these cuts were essential if they were to compete with northern collieries. The court, however, while accepting the day wage claim awarded the same 12½ per cent cut for contract workers which it had previously handed down to northern collieries. As a sequence of this decision the weighted average nominal wage rate for a full week's work in the mining industry as a whole fell from £5 10s 7d in 1929 to £4 17s in 1933. However, the major saving in labour costs came from employing fewer men rather

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2 Illawarra Mercury, 8 August 1933, 18 February 1934; Record Book, 17 August 1933.

3 South Coast Times, 12 August 1931; Illawarra Mercury, 12 December 1931; DMB (Notes), 3 August 1931.


5 Commonwealth Year Book, 1929-1933.
than from reducing wages. Between 1930 and 1935 the cost of wages and salaries per ton fell by nearly one-third from 10.52 shillings to 7.77 shillings.¹

Unemployment had been severe in the 1920s but by the end of 1930 the number of dismissals reached an unprecedented level. In July, five collieries began to retrench and by the end of the month 1,300 miners, or one mineworker in three, was without work.² Such massive dismissals were used by employers as a means of culling out fractious and 'inefficient' workers. Lodge officials, often among those dismissed, could not always prevent arbitrary dismissals but, in the main, were successful in insisting that workers should be cawilled out in order of seniority.³ Re-employment on the same terms was more difficult to ensure. Some mine-managers refused to acknowledge any seniority claims once an employee was dismissed.⁴ Often mines were idle for lengthy periods and lodges frequently ceased to function. When operations were renewed, managers took the opportunity to discriminate against the ragged and frail, against the grey of hair and against the unruly. For the ageing and for workers with compensation-records reinstatement was especially difficult. Colliery managers were reluctant to re-employ such men who might suffer further injury and increase the company's compensation costs. Many companies refused to accept medical board reports certifying men fit for work and preferred examination by a company doctor who was invariably more rigorous and more likely to recommend a return to light duties.

¹ New South Wales Year Books and Exhibit 117 in Coal Miners' Case Commonwealth Arbitration Court, 1938-9. See also Shaw, op.cit., pp.51-63.
² Labor Daily, 7 November 1930.
³ The system of 'first on-last off' operated throughout all New South Wales coalfields.
⁴ Record Book (W.J. Penrose, secretary southern district of Miners' Federation), 11 April 1933. Australian National University Archives, deposit E165/15/2.
only. With a certification such as this compensation payments ceased and the company need not offer re-employment. 1

Behind these dismissals and the attempts to minimise compensation costs was the desire to reduce production to the needs of a shrunken market and to increase efficiency so as to lower costs. Between 1930 and 1935 the cost of salaries and wages per ton was cut back by one-third. 2 The mining of only the most economical workings and the curtailing of developmental projects partly explains this reduction, but much of the saving was achieved at some cost to working conditions.

A common economy measure was to employ deputies as shiftworkers repairing airways and clearing roadways so as to reduce the number of shiftmen required. 3 At one level this was merely a recurrence of attempts by coal owners to take advantage of perennial demarcation problems between the Deputies and Shotfirers' Association and the Miners' Federation. The incidence of protests by miners suggests, however, that in its depression context the dispute involved more than job demarcation. Miners complained that deputies were so encumbered with shiftmen's duties that safety inspections became cursory and dangers unnoticed. A pair of miners at the end of their shift reported an accumulation of gas in a new tunnel. The report book next day showed that the gas had been cleared away. The miners suspected, however, that it was

...a little bit too much to shift such a body of gas in the time. But it was the time when the depression was on and there was rationing - and the next day the pit worked we found, when we examined the place that it had been cleared away and we found the reason why. One of the places had fallen in and...caused the gas to be driven away. 4

1 Ibid., 3 June 1932, 1 August 1933.
2 See p.58.
4 Davidson Commission, evidence given by William Waugh, December 1938, p.325.
Underground conditions in a coalmine are so various and unpredictable that a job described in an agreement often corresponds in only a rough and ready way to the work actually done. As a consequence coalminers, whether contract workers at the coal-face or elsewhere underground, are more frequently than most other workers thrust into the position of bargaining with their employers. In these on-the-spot negotiations the miners' position is exceedingly weak unless strengthened by the power to withhold their labour. Union disintegration during the depression reduced the effectiveness of threatened strike action as a negotiating weapon and enabled the coal proprietors to pay scant regard to individual bargainers.

The cutting of losses often manifested itself in an apparently callous indifference to the safety of workers. This was clearly indicated in the struggle between miner and employer over the placing of roof supports or props in underground workings. Lodge officials claimed that miners should, in the interests of mine-safety, have the unchallenged right to erect props wherever they thought necessary. The owners, however, refused to concede any initiative to individual miners and maintained that only a deputy might direct the erection of props. But conditions in a mine may change rapidly and an apparently solid roof may within minutes break up. In the current dispensation deputies were frequently encumbered with miscellaneous new duties and unable to attend quickly to such vital matters. Miners were therefore often faced with an invidious choice: they could erect props and accept the possibility of non-payment; they could retreat from the dangerous section of the mine and seek permission to mine another place; or they could risk continuing in unsafe conditions. Contract-miners working but two or three days a week found it difficult to avoid the last-named course of action.

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1 Ibid., evidence of Ernest Richard Browne, 1 December 1938, p.315.
2 Ibid.
3 Ibid.
In another field, working economies brought the prospect of increased danger. Owing to lessened use and consequent deterioration of ventilating facilities, the total quantity of air passing through the collieries, particularly in mines working at a considerable distance from the tunnel mouth, diminished appreciably during the depression. Evidence was produced by the district check-inspector which showed that as much as fifty per cent of the inflow of air was lost into the return flow before it reached the coal-face.\(^1\) The preference shown by mine-managers for the cheaper brattice rather than wooden doorways or brick stoppings greatly contributed to the loss of air. Further, boys employed as 'trappers' to open and shut underground doorways so as to regulate the air-flow and prevent rushes of air which were extremely dangerous in the notoriously gassy southern mines, were among the first retrenched.\(^2\)

All New South Wales mines were to a greater or lesser degree affected by the problem of coal dust. In the view of Dr C. Badham, the New South Wales medical officer of industrial hygiene, who had made a special study of the affect of coal dust on the health of miners, southern district coalminers were subjected to a 'phenomenal exposure to dust'.\(^3\) In 1931 Badham examined 471 South Coast miners for symptoms of 'coalminer's lung'.\(^4\) Of those examined 192 or twenty-five

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\(^1\)Ibid., evidence of Alexander Thomas Richardson Emery, southern district check-inspector, 20 September 1938, pp.36-7.

\(^2\)Ibid., evidence of C. Shipton, 9 December 1938, p.401.

\(^3\)Ibid., evidence of Dr Charles Badham, 12 January 1939, p.525. See also, Coal Dust and Stone Dust and its Effects on the Health of Workers, a pamphlet issued by F. Lowden and W.J. Penrose, respectively president and secretary of the Southern District Branch of the Miners' Federation; and Health (Journal of the Commonwealth Department of Health), Vol.IX, No.5, May 1931, pp.33-4.

\(^4\)The term 'coalminer's lung' was applied to a condition which, medical experts believed, could be 'distinguished pathologically' and by chemical analysis from miner's silicosis. Its most significant characteristic is a deposition of coal-dust in the lymphatics of the lung. See Davidson Commission, p.523.
per cent exhibited a 'fine type of fibrosis of the lungs'. Medical boards, however, were reluctant to grant full compensation to 'dusted' miners in all but chronic cases, on the grounds that there had been insufficient research into the causes and long-term effects of the disease. As a result, between 1931 and 1938 only 33 of these miners received compensation and the belief grew among miners that medical board indifference presented 'dusted' miners with a harsh alternative: they could cease work and accept the dole or they could return to work 'to die quickly'.

Management policy of attempting to eliminate all maintenance costs except those essential to continued production exacerbated the dust problem. The condition of the wooden skips which carried coal to the surface deteriorated to a point where they sometimes acted as a more or less coarse sieve. Fine coal particles and dust poured onto underground roadways creating a further hazard to health. Accumulated dust was rarely removed from the workings and often merely shovelled to one side. Attempts to settle dust by watering were sporadic and crude. For example, a cask with water trickling from a side tap was dragged on a slide along the floor of the mine.

Southern district union officials were, like union leaders elsewhere in Australia, as unsuccessful in preventing attacks on working conditions as they were incapable of acting as a defensive bulwark for the miners' standard of living. Miners had plenty of warning to brace themselves for a struggle they knew was coming. As Lowden earlier predicted, the defeat of northern miners was prelude to


2 Ibid.

3 Ibid., evidence of W.J. Farrell, president Corrimal Miners' Lodge, 1 December 1938, p.110.

4 Ibid., evidence of Clement Shipton, Corrimal miner, 9 December 1938, p.400.

5 Ibid., evidence of John Thomas Coltman, president of Mt Keira Miners' Lodge, 28 October 1938, p.266.
wage cuts throughout Australian coalfields. When, in June 1930, southern owners lodged their log of claims the southern district management board formally rejected the owners' claims and threatened to strike rather than accept a wage-cut.²

In large measure the objections voiced by Lowden and Penrose however valid they might be, were in the circumstances part of a desperate game of bluff. At the time the owners' log was served, Bulli miners were on strike. Preliminary discussions between district officials and the Bulli mine management seemed to reveal what the miners thought was an excessive anxiety to restart the mine as soon as possible. If this were so, the miners could adopt the age-old employer tactic of divide and rule. Accordingly, the district management board offered to work any mine which preserved current wage rates.³ Hopes of discord amongst the employers evaporated when the board meeting was interrupted by a phone call from L.E. Blair, managing director of the Bulli company: he would not re-open his mine until wages were reduced.⁴ With their rather desperate tactics defeated the union leaders were left with little room to manoeuvre. They claimed that Blair's statement had converted a strike into a lockout and decided that Bulli miners should therefore be put on the federal relief rates.⁵

In fact the united front which owners presented against union attempts to divide their ranks was too strong to be breached by such tactics and the miners were compelled to accept arbitration. The award subsequently handed down by the Arbitration Court provided that northern wage and contract rates namely a twelve and a half per cent reduction should apply on all New South Wales coalfields and rejected

¹For details of their claim see p.57.
²DMB, 15 June 1930.
³Ibid., 17-18 June 1930.
⁴Ibid.
⁵Ibid. For the Central Council's refusal see CCM, 5-9 August 1930.
the owners' claims for a fifteen per cent reduction.\(^1\) Lowden's reaction to the courts decision was to advise miners to remain at work, at least until the Federal Council had spoken.\(^2\) In view of its debilitated financial position the council advised against a stoppage.\(^3\) In an attempt to forestall militant protests Lowden predicted that the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU), an assembly of key unions, would, when it met on 9 September, declare a general strike 'to defeat the onslaught of the employing class'.\(^4\) However, while critical of the Labor Government's inability to protect workers' interests, the ACTU rejected proposals for a general strike.

Deprived of support from his own federal body and other powerful unions Lowden's only alternative was to adopt the strategy devised during the northern lockout: restricted strike action supported by local and federal levies. Such limitations meant that the strike in the depression became an essentially defensive instrument. Men were called out, in most instances, to resist further wage erosion rather than to press for positive ends, whether political or industrial. In 1930 Lowden supported and helped organise a ten month-long strike at Coalcliff. Conditions at the colliery mirrored those elsewhere on the coalfield but this particular strike was provoked by the question of payments made to men filling skips behind coal-cutting machines. In 1914, when the machines were introduced at the mine, a special rate for fillers of 1s 4d per ton was negotiated. As a depression economy measure, however, fillers were increasingly asked to perform mining duties, indeed to such an extent that a general cross-over resulted. Moreover, the dismissal of six miners for alleged inefficiency threatened the miners' principle of seniority through which some check on the improper use of retrenchment could be maintained. Had these

\(^1\)CAR (1930), p.387.
\(^2\)Sydney Morning Herald, 20, 21 August 1930; Labor Daily, 21 August 1930.
\(^3\)CCM, 28-29 August 1930.
\(^4\)Sydney Morning Herald, 21 August 1930.
dismissals become a precedent, more managers may have purged their work-force at will.\textsuperscript{1} Lowden endorsed the Coalcliff miners' decision to hold a stop-work meeting. On the one hand he demanded an immediate conference with the management and on the other hand he asked the federal council to meet at once to grant financial support. A series of abortive meetings with the owners followed, and on 9 June Coalcliff miners struck.\textsuperscript{2}

The Coalcliff proprietors refused to consider either the reinstatement of the dismissed miners or to recognise any demarcation problem concerning the respective duties of fillers and miners. They were prepared for and confident of withstanding a lengthy strike for two reasons. Firstly, they saw opposition to coal-cutting machines as only another instance of the miners' hostility towards mechanisation which in their view was essential to the lowering of production costs per ton and to the long-term restructuring of the coal industry. In the second place, most of their orders could be transferred to their other local colliery, Mt Kēira. In November, J.B. Vickery a director of the colliery, made clear the company's determination to stand firm. He declared that he would close the mine and dismiss the whole staff rather than give in to the miners.\textsuperscript{3} Lowden countered with a declaration that the miners too were prepared for a lengthy strike.\textsuperscript{4}

By January 1931, however, the latter were ready to negotiate. The Federal Council, which had financed the strike, considered cutting relief payments by half and expressed the hope that strikers would be eligible for the dole.\textsuperscript{5} Meanwhile, Lowden sought a conference before an independent arbitrator. Though initially refusing to accept anything less than a hearing before the Arbitration Court,

\textsuperscript{1}Labor Daily, 29 August 1930.
\textsuperscript{2}DMB, 17-18 June 1930.
\textsuperscript{3}Sydney Morning Herald, 1 November 1930.
\textsuperscript{4}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{5}CCM, 3-8 February 1931.
Vickery grudgingly settled for the private arbitration of E.H. Coneybeer, a Commonwealth Arbitration Commissioner. 1

The settlement reached was a partial victory for the miners and an indication of official tactics. Fillers were awarded 1s 3/4d a ton, or an increase on a sixteen-ton basis of 1s 8d or 1s 9d per day. 2 Many miners probably agreed with the verdict of the conservative press which described the outcome as a pyrrhic victory, for the mine restarted with less than a third of the pre-strike work-force. 3 In spite of the retrenchment, militant spokesmen professed to find in the outcome of the strike justification for their claims that a general strike would bring all owners to their knees. 4

Despite the qualified success of the Coalcliff strike, it was clear that the Federal Council's decision to cut relief payments placed severe limitations on Lowden's already restricted powers of manoeuvre. Moreover, the periodic closure of collieries as contracts expired gave added weight to the employers' claims that strikes could only lead to the cancellation of remaining orders and the eventual closure of still further mines. Together with the presidents of the other mining districts, Lowden, in June 1931, produced an assessment of the problems facing the Federation and their implications for unionism at the district level. 5 A Central Council meeting in early June had appointed a committee and directed it to report on the following issues:

...finance, levies, organization on the job, the recent reductions and their general effect, the proposals of Council to preserve and if possible make better present wages and conditions, the cost of running the organization from a District and Federation point of view, the absolute necessity

1 DMB, 16 February 1931.
2 Filling rates had been reduced by the Beeby Award from 1s 4d to 1s 2d per ton.
3 Sydney Morning Herald, 8 April 1931.
4 Labor Daily, 9 April 1931.
5 CCM, 2-6 June 1931.
of carrying on the Federation under the Rules, and the need for local information being supplied to the Federation through the local District Office. Periodical statements regarding matters in different districts.¹

As presented, the report acknowledged the disintegration which already had taken place and admitted a forty per cent loss of membership.² In such circumstances the committee felt that any attempt to enforce the payment of levies to the Federal body was futile.³ Districts were in future to finance their own stoppages, which were, as a general rule, to be avoided. Individual lodge committees were instructed to be more vigilant than they had been in the past and to prepare themselves to defend working conditions.⁴

The districts, however, were incapable of assuming the limited and defensive role envisaged by the federal executive. The decline in income which accompanied falling membership subjected the internal machinery of the districts to severe strain. Officials' salaries were cut by twelve and a half per cent in 1930.⁵ While the following February the District Management Board asked lodges to pay the wages of their delegates.⁶ Yet at the same meeting acknowledging the futility of the request, the Board resolved to meet on Saturdays at their own expense.⁷

In part, seeking financial aid from the lodges was a retaliation against the inability or in some cases the unwillingness of lodges to pay their dues. By March 1931

¹Ibid. The full committee comprised: D. Rees (General President), T. Hoare (Northern District), F. Lowden (Southern District), C. Roy (Western District), W. Young (Victoria?), F.A. Miller (Barrier), C. Kilpatrick (Queensland).

²Review of the Position of the Australasian Coal and Shale Employees' Federation and the Findings of the Committee (Sydney, 1931), p.2.

³Ibid., p.4.

⁴Ibid.

⁵DMF, 16 September 1930.

⁶Ibid., 16 February 1931.

⁷Ibid.
lodge contributions to the district were more than £1,000 in arrears.\textsuperscript{1} Many lodges now existed in name only and those which survived were less concerned to pay arrears than to seek the remission of dues for miners struggling to make £2 a week. The Bulli lodge ignored repeated requests for the payment of dues, and after a series of threats was expelled from the district.\textsuperscript{2}

While Lowden and other signatories of the 1931 report envisaged a lengthy defensive period to avoid further deterioration, they hoped that the Coal Bill proposed by the New South Wales Labor Government would provide safeguards against further wage reductions and initiate positive gains for miners.\textsuperscript{3} The Bill introduced in 1931 by J.M. Baddeley, Minister of Mines and earlier president of the Miners' Federation, owed its immediate origin to the recommendations of the 1929 Royal Commission. Its report advocated the establishment of a Coal Industry Board and Baddeley's Bill proposed such a board, armed with wide powers. Coal from individual mines was to be classified according to quality and contracts allocated by districts. Where district allocation was not sufficient to permit nine days' work each fortnight, the Bill empowered the board to close mines either temporarily or permanently. The standard rate of dividend was to be regulated and its upper limit fixed at ten per cent to prevent the accumulation of huge reserves by the owners. Profits in excess of this figure were to be used for the benefit of the industry generally. The Bill was hotly debated by the Opposition who demanded 'a little more business in Government and a little less Government in business.'\textsuperscript{4} Coal owners stigmatised the Bill as 'Sovietization' and scoffed at suggestions that A.C. Willis, Baddeley's partner in the early

\textsuperscript{1}Ibid., 31 March 1931.

\textsuperscript{2}Ibid., 28 January 1931, 18 July 1931, 11 November 1931.

\textsuperscript{3}Review of the Position, p.5.

days of the Miners' Federation, should be the Coal Board's first chairman. Though the Bill was passed by both houses, the Stevens Government, which came into office in May 1932, did not present it for royal assent.¹

Rank and file opinion in the southern district supported official policy as set forth in the Review of the Position. There was little enthusiasm among southern miners for a general strike proposal advanced in 1932 by the Federation executive in support of Victorian state miners at Wonthaggi. When their mine was declared a state instrumentality by the Victorian government they faced a twenty per cent reduction in day wages and contract rates.² Aggregate meetings of southern miners ignored militant strike proposals and preferred instead to heed the warnings of the elderly general secretary, Dan Rees, that to expect help from other unions would be 'relying on a broken reed'.³ Strikers, he went on, could expect no financial assistance and would have to fight 'on their stomach'.⁴ When put to the vote the general strike proposal was rejected by 837 to 202.⁵

The reluctance of established union officials to endorse a general strike and their denunciation of desperation strikes at the lodge level was in turn condemned by spokesmen for the MMM as 'defeatist'.⁶ Scarcely two score in number in the Wollongong district and directed by communist leaders, the movement viewed the depression and especially wage-cutting

²CCM, 6-10 September 1932.
³Wollongong Mercury, 16 September 1932.
⁴Ibid.
⁵CCM, 26-28 September 1932.
⁶Red Leader, 14 September 1932.
as a chance to radicalise the masses. They sometimes professed little or no interest in settling workers' immediate grievances and opposed the intercession of 'reformist' mediators. Critical of the timidity of the miners' Federation, militant spokesmen declared that

...the day of the office bound official is past. The workers need men of action who will give a lead, men who will come out and fight for their class, whether on the question of free speech the imposition of wage cuts or anything that tends to worsen the conditions of the working class.1

The militants, however, were unsuccessful in their attempts to win official positions within the union. In the 1931 district elections they campaigned vociferously for their ticket. The decision of the 68 year old J.T. Sweeney to retire in December 1931 led to a strenuous contest for his post. In the event the militant minority candidate, W. Challenger polled lightly and W.J. Penrose, who had been for fourteen years secretary of the Mt Kembla lodge and a supporter of moderate counsels, was elected.2 Thereafter there was no change in union leaders, demonstrating the meagre local influence of industrial radicals.

Union stability during the depression may be explained in several ways. Immersed though they were in the day-to-day details of union administration, local officials were not entangled in red tape or overwhelmed with book work as their critics claimed. Nor did they lose sight of workers' needs. On the other hand militant spokesmen had no forum within the ranks of working miners except for irregular pit-top meetings. They gained most of their slender and unreliable support from cavilled out miners, many of whom were now itinerant searchers for work. Moreover, militants did not speak with one voice and offered no clear alternative policy to that adopted by the officials. Stripped of class slogans, protestations of official treachery and 'lying defeatism',

1Illawarra Mercury, 10 December 1931.
2Ibid., 11 December 1931.
3Red Leader, 14 September 1932.
their demands were, on many points, scarcely distinguishable those of the officials. Both condemned Labor politicians for their inactivity, and both demanded such immediate reforms as the introduction of a quota system to ensure a more equal distribution of government coal contracts between districts. Further, even the more constructive suggestions put forward by militants proved unworkable. Their policy of concentration of authority at the district level was, by their own admission, a failure. It neither stimulated rank and file participation in any general policy of direct action nor did it lead to greater unity.

Union stability, however, owed more to the experience and ability of the depression leaders than to the weakness of the opposition. An IWW sympathiser during the war years (1914-1918) F. (Fred) Lowden could not be regarded as a moderate. In 1917 he was arrested and charged with the attempted murder of a 'loyalist' railwayman during the railway strike of that year. It was later proved that he had been the victim of a deliberate plot. During the depression he did not hesitate to endorse the more radical activities and attitudes of the labour movement. In 1931 he moved not to send a delegate to the state ALP Conference as a protest against the failure of the Lang government to help the unemployed. He chose to support the Unemployed Workers' Movement rather than the non-communist Unemployed Workers' Union, and took part in the fight of the unemployed for the right of free speech. The delegate board under his chairmanship voted to pay the fines of convicted unemployed and avowed communist protesters, though this action was not always appreciated by those who wished to appear as working

1 Illawarra Mercury, 10 August 1931; Record Book, 8 May 1934.
2 Mt Keira Lodge Minute Books, 28 September 1929.
4 DMB, 10 July 1931.
5 See Chapter Three, pp.117-49.
class martyrs. Moreover, Lowden, Sweeney and later Penrose administered union rules with a fine combination of humanity and business sense, in which the former predominated. Coalcliff miners who had been paid-off ten weeks before a strike were issued with strike relief dockets; miners in debt to storekeepers were allowed to overdraw their strike relief vouchers; incapacitated miners whose compensation payments ceased during the strike were similarly placed on relief lists.

Nevertheless, Lowden was prepared to clash openly with militants who sought to promote desperation strikes. When Bulli miners came out in June 1933, ostensibly to secure the reinstatement of an elderly compensated miner, Lowden demanded an immediate return to work. The decision to strike had been taken at a hastily convened lodge meeting which was also reported to be poorly attended. The stoppage came at a time when federation officials were beginning to feel that distress and unemployment made it difficult to accomplish anything worthwhile. They asserted darkly that there were 'forces at work' and so many factions that a 'big body of men don't really know where they are'. Lowden denounced factionalism and convened an emergency meeting of the lodge at which he advocated an immediate resumption. The colliery had closed for five months in the latter part of 1930 and resumed operations at twenty per cent of its depression output. The miners suggested, and the management

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1 For example, John Hitchen, a volatile and temperamental communist, convicted of taking part in an illegal procession, took umbrage at the board's action in paying his fine and had to be forcibly removed from a later board meeting at which he became violent. He later failed to see why the board should refuse his application for a personal loan. See DMB, 16 April 1930, 15 May 1930.

2 CCM, 23, 24 April 1931.

3 Daily Telegraph, 8 June 1933. The miner concerned had been declared fit for work by a medical board but was refused work by the company.

4 Sydney Morning Herald, 8 June 1933.

5 CCM, 7-11 February 1933.
had accepted, rationing of available work to prevent retrenchment and the mine continued to operate by virtue of small government contracts. A stoppage now, in Lowden's view, would mean the loss of present contracts and another closure of the mine.\(^1\) The owners agreed with his assessment as did the great majority of miners. They now voted by 220 to 24 to return to work.\(^2\)

Rationing or work-sharing although commonplace and as often implemented at the request of the miners as by the dictates of the proprietors, was not acceptable to the militants. In June 1931 Mt Kembla miners accepted a plan put forward by their employers which advocated that the workforce be divided into two equal sections, and that the groups work ten days in rotation. In December of the same year, the Miners' Federation endorsed the acceptance of work-sharing at South Bulli mine. Employers who offered to ration work claimed they did so for humanitarian reasons. The militant miners, however, argued plausibly that when workers agreed to share available work they, rather than the employer, were contributing to unemployment relief. To them rationing was a 'dying form of capitalism', and an attempt to 'make the poor keep the poor'\(^3\) by allowing the employer to maintain his rate of profit and avoid absenteeism.

Claims by militants that union leaders ignored their unemployed members had little or no foundation. In June 1930 district officials asked lodges to consider how long caved-out miners should retain membership of the union. Some lodges favoured the retention of membership until a permanent job was found, but most preferred to limit the period of unemployed membership to six months.\(^4\) While conceding unemployed miners the right to vote on most lodge affairs many wished to exclude them from the discussion of all financial matters.\(^5\)

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\(^1\)Sydney Morning Herald, 9 June 1933.
\(^2\)Ibid.
\(^3\)Red Leader, 15 February 1933.
\(^4\)DMB, 12 December 1930; Illawarra Mercury, 18 December 1930.
\(^5\)Labor Daily, 19 September 1931.
practice there were great difficulties in the way of continued effective participation by the unemployed in union affairs whatever restrictions were imposed. Meetings were often at inconvenient times and few unemployed could afford train fares to the pits. The existence of such obstacles gave rise to the claim that the workless were being deliberately excluded from union affairs. But even where transport to meetings was provided, as it frequently was, unemployed men felt their time was better spent looking for work elsewhere.

Two developments, however, appeared to strengthen a conviction widely voiced among retrenched miners that there were three classes - the bosses, the workers and the workless. The first of these was the failure of the men at work to maintain the darg, a mining custom limiting daily output, and the second was the readiness with which shiftworkers accepted overtime. In September 1932, Scarborough miners voted 'two to one' to lift the darg, and in the following months many other mines did likewise. Militants demanded that the lifting of the darg be met by a district stoppage, but they were opposed by Lowden. He pointed to the reserve army of potential strike-breakers at the gates, and emphasised his warning by asserting that a strike would issue in the debarring of all miners from the dole. Rather than employ additional shiftworkers managers frequently offered overtime. They claimed they did so because the miners' policy of requiring fourteen days' notice of dismissal prevented their

1 The expression derives from feudal times when the set task to be carried out by a serf was known as daywerk or daywork. The darg developed historically as an important element in the self-imposed discipline peculiar to the conditions of the industry. It was instigated to curb employers' efforts to work miners for long hours when trade was good and then dismiss them and to eliminate excessive competition between contract miners. For a fuller treatment see Robin Gollan, The Coalminers of New South Wales, pp.24-5.

2 Sydney Morning Herald, 16 September 1932, 1 October 1932; Record Book, 12 January 1934; Davidson Commission, evidence of Clement Shipton, 9 December 1938, p.401; Red Leader, 26 October 1932.

3 Red Leader, 26 October 1932.
offering a few days' work to cavilled-out shiftmen. Whatever the reason, unemployed shiftmen could not be expected to see the equity of such an unequal division of available work. The extraordinary difficulty of balancing the claims of all parties was an ever present problem during the depression.

Of the Port Kembla metal industries the copper refinery and manufacturing plant were the first to be affected by decreasing employment opportunities. Domestic depression in the metal trades preceded world contraction. The period 1925-8 was one of stagnation especially in the copper industries. There were several reasons for this. Firstly, in the early post-war years the industry over-invested in plant extension. Secondly, overseas companies became more competitive as Australian price-levels were sustained above the continued downward trend of import prices. Finally, the exhaustion of Australian copper mines meant a recession for refining and manufacturing alike.

The performance of the Port Kembla copper industry reflected what was happening in the industry generally. The problem was most evident at the refinery. After the closure of the Mt Morgan mine and the establishment by the Mt Lyell Mining and Railway Company of its own refinery in Tasmania, confidence in continued operations at Port Kembla evaporated. The efficient working of the plant depended on maintaining smelting operations at a minimum level of 'between thirty-five and fifty per cent capacity'. The realisation of even this limited objective rested on the already doubtful assumption that a steady supply of ore would be forthcoming from

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1Record Book, 27 May, 26 July 1932.
3E.A. White's report to Sir Colin Fraser (Broken Hill Associated Smelters Pty. Ltd.), ER & S Files, 20 June 1928.
cloncurry gougers. In 1926 the company had established a permanent office in Cloncurry where gougers' ore was weighed, sampled and assayed by the Queensland government and then sold to the highest bidder. Competition from overseas buyers was keen but the ER & S policy of making full payment at purchase gave it an advantage over other buyers. By 1930, however, the Cloncurry mines were yielding only low grade ores. Failing a sharp rise in the price of copper which would make continued mining profitable, closure seemed imminent. Moreover, the decision of the Queensland state government to reopen the Chillagoe smelters increased competition for the ores that were mined. A monopoly of the market for the new smelter was assured when the Queensland government withdrew a seventy-five per cent rebate on rail freight of gougers' ore and increased the freight charges on the Cloncurry-Townsville railway from 12s 3d per ton to 40s 3d per ton. By contrast, ore could now be hauled to Chillagoe, almost twice the distance, for 2s per ton. Consequently, the company's copper purchases from Cloncurry slumped. The company's intake of copper fell from 16,606 tons in 1929 to 8,175 tons in 1930. Finally, in July 1931 the Cloncurry office was closed and the purchase of ore from the district ceased. The search for an alternative supply of copper ore proved abortive. The mining of deposits at Milburn Creek, Moonta (South Australia) and Mineral Hill mine, Condobolin (New South Wales), was found too costly. From 1931 onwards therefore copper bearing material coming to Port Kembla was limited to copper matte from Broken Hill Associated Smelters, residues from Mt Lyell and whatever scrap metal the company could purchase.

Output from the copper manufacturing industry, apart from a brief recovery in 1929, had similarly ceased to grow

1 Ibid., p.9.
2 Ibid., p.10.
3 ER & S Directors' Reports (Company Files), 1929-1930.
4 Ibid., 1931.
5 Ibid., 1929, 1931, 1932.
before the depression. Government contracts for copper wire needed in electric power development schemes and for the requirements of state railway departments, which had stimulated expansion until the mid-1920s declined almost overnight. Lack of orders for telephone cable restricted the plant to half its normal capacity and brought about its eventual closure in January 1931. Railway orders dropped by as much as eighty-one per cent.¹ So dependent was the company on government expenditure that, although orders from the manufacturing and trading sector remained at nearly their previous level, overall production for the year ending 31 March fell by thirty-six per cent.

Between March 1931 and July 1933 total production fell by a further 32.5 per cent. During the same period the telephone cable factory resumed spasmodic operations, producing only 314 tons or seven per cent of its 1929 production. Wire and cable production fell sixty-five per cent below the 1929 figure. Only tube production increased during the depression. Water and sewerage work were encouraged by relief councils appointed in 1932 to recommend work suitable for the relief of unemployment. Such projects more nearly met their criteria that only so-called productive, or self-liquidating, projects could be considered.²

The decreasing Australian market for the company's products was accompanied by growing overseas competition. Falling copper prices on the London market enabled English mining companies to exploit the cheaper African copper supplies. Priced at £65 10s per ton in 1928, copper fell to £39 11s per ton in 1931 and to £36 13s per ton the following year.³ Lower overseas copper prices had the effect of reducing the protection afforded by the ad-valorem duties on the company's products. At the same time, Metal Manufactures

¹Metal Manufactures General Manager's Report (Company Files), 14 May 1931.
²Loan (Unemployment Relief Bills), No.1 & 2 CPD, Vol.134, pp.404-5, 1281-2.
³Metal Manufactures General Manager's Reports (Company Files), 1930-3.
was committed to a long-term agreement with the local refinery which pegged the price at a high uniform level. This agreement weakened appeals by Metal Manufactures for increased tariff protection.1

In these circumstances no large scale re-organisation was possible, though to keep the plant running more continuously and to lower operation costs, some attempt at diversification was made. Quantities of brass wire and tinned copper were produced but neither on a large scale.2 The cost of the alloy was too high to encourage greater production of brass wire and there was no substantial market for tinned copper.

As a result of these trends in production, employment in the Port Kembla copper industries slumped and became more intermittent. In 1926 the refinery employed 450 men; by 1928 this had fallen to 150, and a year later to 100. Between 1930 and 1933 the plant required less than 100 men.3 Furnaces were operated in rotation and it was company policy to employ as few permanent employees as possible.4 Casual labourers were employed when the furnaces operated, but were dismissed immediately they ceased to function. When the smelter shut down, all men, apart from those needed to maintain the plant before the next campaign5 and those most difficult to replace such as feeders, skimmers and cranemen, were dismissed. Possession of even these skills, however, was no guarantee of permanent work and it became increasingly common for all men to be dismissed as a campaign ended.6

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1Ibid., 14 May 1930; Metal Manufactures Directors' Minutes (company files), 19 March 1930.
2Metal Manufactures General Manager's Reports (company files), 14 May 1931.
4E.A. White's report to Sir Colin Fraser (ER & S Files), p.24.
5A campaign was a full cycle of the process whereby a shipment of copper-ore passed through the blast-furnaces of the smelting stage and then the refinery.
6E.A. White's report to Sir Colin Fraser, pp.24-5.
best, even experienced men worked twenty-six weeks a year during the period 1930-3. What employment they did receive came unevenly. During smelter campaigns men frequently worked seven days a week. When the campaign ceased, a few days' work in the yards as labourers finally gave way to weeks of unemployment.

The constant flow of workers through the plant had the effect of increasing the accident rate. The number of accidents which resulted in a loss of working time increased from 60 in 1930 to 80 in 1932 and to 101 in 1935. Expressed as accidents per thousand man-days worked, the increase was from 0.67 to 1.24 or a doubling of the rate.¹ Inexperienced men were frequently burnt with molten metal.

Employment in the copper manufacturing plant fell from 582 in 1929 to a low point of 211 in 1932. Recovery was gradual thereafter, but by 1936 the number employed was only two-thirds of the 1929 figure. The retrenchment of unskilled operators was more arbitrary than among the coalminers. Although the 1926 Award provided a blueprint for retrenchment—married men and returned soldiers were to be given preference over single men though length of service was to be considered—the AWU was not sufficiently strong to enforce its observance. Company policy was simply to close complete parts of the plant as orders ceased, dismissing entire sections of its employees. The sudden collapse of telephone cable orders, for example, was followed by the dismissal of one hundred women operators. Three years later, only eight women had been re-employed.²

While machine operators possessed no real skills which would ensure re-employment, their position as operators was immeasurably better than that of the unskilled labourers. Some machine operators did develop a certain deftness which made them marginally more productive. Labourers on the other hand had no bargaining strength. Their jobs had been tenuous

¹ ER & S, General Superintendent's Report, 29 October 1940.
² See Appendix C: Metal Manufactures Limited Average Annual Number of Employees, 1919-1944, p.343.
throughout the 1920s. A shifting group, they had obtained intermittent work as copper arri.ved for treatment and if they were fortunate more lengthy periods as construction workers. They drifted from one plant to another at Port Kembla, picking up a few days' work at each. They then often moved on, returning later.\(^1\) They represented a difficult group for the unionists to organise and seriously undermined attempts by wharf labourers to establish their right to work company wharves.\(^2\) Their places in the yards were sometimes taken by operators who returned to their machines once production picked up. Least affected were craftsmen, engineers, fitters and turners, although carpenters employed in the manufacture of cases and drums were less secure in their jobs. Clerical and administrative staff, though rationed, remained at much the same level in numbers.\(^3\)

Wage levels for operators and labourers held constant until the dismissal, in May 1932, of the Lang Labor Government which had refused to authorise cuts in the basic wage. This was in spite of the fact that, in August 1931, the Full Bench of the Arbitration Court, acting in the best interests of the nation as it understood them, reversed the precedent of twenty years and made an arbitrary cut in the basic wage. After listening to lengthy arguments from both employees and employers, the Court issued its verdict on 22 January 1931. The under-consumption argument of the unions was rejected in favour of the orthodox economists' testimony which maintained that a reduction in wage costs would benefit all industries and would eventually result in the absorption of the unemployed. State Tribunals followed the Court's example and by July 1931 all states apart from New South Wales had fallen into line.

\(^1\) An examination of employment-cards and day-books at Metal Manufactures and ER & S is the basis for this paragraph.

\(^2\) South Coast Branch Waterside Workers' Federation Minute Books, 14 April 1932.

\(^3\) Metal Manufactures Employment figures 1930-3, as supplied by the company.
However, on 13 May 1932, the governor of New South Wales, Sir Philip Game, dismissed Lang for a breach of federal law and invited B.S.B. Stevens, leader of the United Australia Party, to form a ministry. Stevens called on the Country Party to form a Coalition cabinet and almost immediately ordered an enquiry into the living wage. As a result of the enquiry, the adult male wage rate was reduced from £4 2s 6d to £3 10s per week. In May 1933 it was reduced to £3 8s 6d and in October of the same year to £3 6s 6d.¹

In the period until the lowering of Award Rates in New South Wales, the operators bore the brunt of attempts by employers to limit expenditure. The delay in extending the cut in the living wage to New South Wales had the effect of bringing skilled craftsmen below the level of their labouring assistants.² Award rates for labourers employed in Port Kembla industries were established subject to the continued payment of bonuses. With the business decline of the mid- and late 1920s, the employers found it convenient to argue that bonus payments did not make the operators piece-workers but were an example of 'profit-sharing'.³ Disputes over bonus payments were common enough, and the introduction of new machinery was invariably followed by adjustments of bonus rates. During the depression, however, it was the company's desire to counteract what its general manager termed 'the long-delayed enquiry into the state living wage'⁴ and not mechanisation that explains bonus reductions. In April 1930 the Port Kembla branch of the AWU complained that bonus quotas were being systematically adjusted upwards.⁵ By 1933

¹See Schedvin, Australia and the Great Depression, pp.215-6, 345-50.
²See Amalgamated Engineering Union, Monthly Reports, March 1932, p.5.
³H.R. Lee to J.P. Caddy (Metal Manufactures' Files), 25 August 1933.
⁴Metal Manufactures General Manager's Report (company files), 25 September 1932.
⁵F.H. Finch (AWU secretary), to J.P. Caddy (Metal Manufactures Files), 29 April 1930.
bonus rates had been cut by an average of fifty per cent, or 2s per day, an amount more than equal to the wage-cuts imposed by the Federal Court.

The erosion of bonus payments made to labourers and machine operators was accompanied by an attack on special payments. Various expedients were used to avoid the payment of margins for special classes of work. The terms of employment for most labourers included a 'mixed-function' clause which stipulated that where a labourer in the course of his day's work performed more than one category of labour, his daily rate of pay should be that of the higher classification. Union leaders complained unsuccessfully that either the higher rates were paid only for the time spent on the job or that no extra payment was made.

For most copper workers as for the great majority of Wollongong's coalminers the early 1930s constituted a depression within a depression. Unlike the coalminers, however, men employed in the copper industries, especially the unskilled or semi-skilled, were not always certain of obtaining a share of such work as periodically became available. Competition for work at Port Kembla was intense. Even men who had worked at the copper plants since immediately after the war were to be found among the ranks of the unemployed drifting around Port Kembla in the early months of 1930.

Men engaged in the iron and steel industry were on the whole the worst hit by declining employment opportunities. AIS, caught in the middle of transferring its plant from Lithgow, were totally unprepared for and unable to adjust to the reduced market for its products. Construction work at Port Kembla was incomplete and the plant was not ready for full-scale production. The building and construction industry throughout Australia came to a standstill almost overnight and AIS which relied extensively upon demand for its heavy steel, foundry iron and pipes, were confronted with near empty order books. The company, unlike BHP, did not have outlets to the Australian iron and steel products market and
with the diminution of traditional markets the firm found itself in the invidious position of competing with BHP for the remaining available markets. It was an uneven contest. The integrated BHP steelworks were capable of more efficient operations than the half-finished Port Kembla works. Further, the competitive ability of AIS was reduced by higher labour costs. In 1928 the Lithgow wages board had been extended to include the Port Kembla works and most of the wages and classifications were taken over from Lithgow, where wages had always been higher than in Newcastle. They were also higher for individual margins and there was a 3s a week loading for holidays worked and for unpaid lost-time. In 1926, because of the extremely arduous conditions of work at Lithgow, the loading had been increased to 7s a week.

When the depression struck Port Kembla, AIS applied for a ten per cent wage-cut to offset its disadvantages in competition with BHP, claiming that because the Lithgow-Port Kembla awards were higher than the Newcastle award, BHP had substantially lower labour costs. Although Port Kembla as a new plant naturally did not have as many classifications as Newcastle, AIS in comparing the awards in 1931 claimed that in forty-three cases out of sixty-nine the Port Kembla award was above that of the Newcastle award. Conversely, only in eighteen cases was the Newcastle award higher than Port Kembla's. The court accepted the company's argument. It seems clear, however, as Helen Hughes points out, that differences in wages were only a minor factor in explaining the inability of AIS to compete with BHP which clearly established itself as the sole supplier of the Australian market for iron and steel. Even in good times, the attempt by Hoskins to transfer an entire steelworks would have been

1 *NSW Arbitration Reports*, 1928, pp.221-3.
a bold and costly venture. In times of economic depression it proved in almost all respects a costly failure. Until 1931, the company had to use its Lithgow steel furnaces because it was unable to complete the open-hearth installations at Port Kembla. Failure to pay a dividend to shareholders between 1930 and 1933 undermined attempts to raise more capital on the depressed financial market. Calls for additional funds were made in 1932 and again in 1933 but the sums raised were never enough to put the works into operation.

Production at Port Kembla after March 1930 was spasmodic. In April the company announced that lessened demand had led to the accumulation of stocks and that work in all departments was to cease temporarily. Thereafter the plant operated unevenly and departments worked only as long as was needed to complete an order. Only the spun-pipe department maintained anything like constant performance. It produced water and sewerage pipes from 4 inches to 20 inches internal diameter used extensively in government-organised relief work. A review of production figures demonstrates the course of the slump. In 1929 slightly more than 130,000 tons of pig-iron were produced but by 1931 annual production reached only 47,000 tons and fell further to 37,000 the following year. Steel production dropped further and more quickly, falling from 49,000 tons in 1930 to 18,000 tons the following year.

Variations in the amount of work available at the steelworks had a greater impact on the district than any other local industry. The table of average daily employees shows continued growth from 750 in 1929 to 1,500 in 1933.

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1 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 April 1930.


4 Ibid.
These figures, however, conceal the actual impact of reduced production at the steelworks on the level of local employment. Construction work had added to the work-force until, by the latter part of 1929, the steelworks employed 1,500 men, excluding staff members, and was second only to the mining companies as a source of employment. In April 1930 when the blast-furnace was closed down and construction work terminated, all 1,500 employees were dismissed.\(^1\) Within a month the spun-pipe department restarted with one hundred men, and shortly afterwards the blast-furnace restarted and a further 500 men were employed. The respite was short-lived. In October the blast-furnace was again closed down and throughout 1932 the reduced work-force was rationed two weeks in four.\(^2\) Such was the plight of the company that staff were compelled to work at the bench and the \textit{Labor Daily} reported that 'the chief electrician and the chief chemist and the research officer pull the ashes away from the boiler'.\(^3\)

Meanwhile a body of men in excess of 1,000 was thrown into a state of near-permanent unemployment.

Despite the dismissals, the steelworks continued to attract men looking for work. Itinerant searchers for work drifted into Port Kembla from all parts of eastern Australia and set up camp on the only tract of free land within view of the steelworks. This was an ill-drained, swampy area which later achieved notoriety as the Flinders Street unemployed camp. With men at the gate and company struggling to keep afloat, working conditions for those fortunate enough to be on the inside deteriorated.

\(^1\) \textit{Sydney Morning Herald}, 9 April 1930.
\(^2\) \textit{Illawarra Mercury}, 6 October 1932.
\(^3\) \textit{Labor Daily}, 22 April 1932. This report was confirmed by interviews with men who worked at the steelworks during the depression. Especially valuable was an interview with Mr A. Kruger (17 January 1972), now assistant manager at ER & S, who in 1932 was an assistant chemist at AIS.
The works were known locally as a 'bloodhouse' or 'The butcher's Shop'. The attempts to carry on construction work alongside normal production led to a chaotic and potentially dangerous situation on the site: equipment was precariously placed, tools were left lying around. It was not surprising that a continual stream of accidents both minor and serious occurred. Production workers were in general poorly supervised. A court inquiry into a double fatality in the rolling mills in 1933 laid much of the blame on the lack of oversight. Inexperienced workers were involved in many of the accidents but company policy compounded the problem. When new orders were received, it was cheaper to offer existing workers overtime than to employ further hands. Consequently, it was common for men to work double shifts, many leaving their homes (often as far north as Helensburgh) at 5 a.m. They returned home at 11 p.m., and reported at the works again at 7 a.m. the next morning. Fatigue almost certainly contributed to the growing accident rate. Another company economy had potentially dangerous consequences and aroused the fear and resentment of workers who manned the plant's railway engines. Instead of a crew of two, a single man was expected to stoke and drive, and hence he could not keep continuous watch for men crossing the lines. There were also complaints by workers that scaffolding erected on the construction sites was dangerously inadequate.

How did the unions react to this situation? In general they offered only token resistance. Unionism survived reasonably intact on the coalfields because it was firmly rooted in the social fabric of the mining communities which

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1 Tannock Letters op.cit. and CPD, Vol.19, March 1936, p.383. This viewpoint has been perpetuated in the works of contemporary novelist and historian Kylie Tennant. See The Battlers (Sydney, 1971 edition), p.389. 'If it's anything like Port Kembla...I'd sooner stay away. Men waiting round the steel works, so that when a chap is killed they could get his job.'

2 South Coast Times, 14 January 1934. I have been unable to obtain a set of figures for accidents at the steelworks.

3 Illawarra Mercury, 14 August 1928.
sustained it and because miners were steeped in its traditions. Traditions of this kind had not the time to take root at Port Kembla. Workers in the copper industry for example, received little protection from the AWU. Throughout 1930 dues became increasingly hard to collect and when in early 1931 the union secretary, F.H. (Fred) Finch, was dismissed from the manufacturing plant the union continued to exist in little but name. Unemployed for twelve months, Finch eventually found work as a clerk with the municipality of Central Illawarra and never returned to union affairs.¹

Those who remained at work at the refinery and at the manufacturing plant later elected representatives to continue negotiations with the employers but there was little to show for these efforts. In 1932 when the Port Kembla companies sought to cut wages by 9d a day, to remove the holiday clause and to reduce wages paid youths and females, local organisers appeared willing to accept cuts in juniors' rates in the hope of forestalling other reductions. Belated support from the AWU central council, however, forced the companies to go before the Industrial Commission.²

The craft unions were more successful in retaining their members. Membership of the AEU grew during the depression from 180 in 1930 to 212 by 1932 and to 257 in 1933.³ The increase in membership, however, added little to local union solidarity. Most new members were fitters and turners who had been dismissed in Sydney and came south looking for work erecting the new steel plant at AIS.⁴ Commonly the men arrived in Port Kembla without their families, set up temporary camps near the steelworks and returned to their Sydney homes at the weekends. What organisation existed at

¹Interview with Mr F.H. Finch, 22 January 1972.
²H.R. Lee (Australian Mines and Metals Associations, New South Wales Branch) to J.P. Caddy (Metal Manufactures' Files), 25 November 1932.
³AEU, Monthly Report accounts for September 1930, 1932, 1933. There was no return from the Port Kembla branch in 1931.
⁴Ibid.
Port Kembla collapsed with the wholesale dismissals in May 1931.\(^1\) In the absence of the supervision provided by law, the Port Kembla companies were able to avoid paying a 5s allowance for daily hiring and to ignore preference to unionists.\(^2\) Despite a brief recovery of work in October the district organiser found it impossible to revive the branch.\(^3\)

The systematic working of overtime was indicative of the collapse of unionism at the steelworks and served to produce further resentment among unemployed workers. J. Ward, the FIA secretary, sought with diminishing success to retain what degree of solidarity there was in the ranks; organising the shifting, undisciplined mass of desperate men who drifted around Port Kembla was a difficult task. The unskilled labourers, many of them itinerants humping their swag in search of work, could not be brought into the ranks. Many returned to Sydney at the weekends and this made it difficult to organise a campaign among them. Moreover, the company actively discouraged the extension of unionism among casual labourers: men seeking employment 'on the hill' were carefully scrutinised.\(^4\)

In 1930 Ward, in his role as local secretary, reported to the federal council of the FIA that his branch was unable to pay capitation fees of £17 12s 6d and sought financial aid from the New South Wales state executive.\(^5\) Until 1932 the branch continued to exist in name only: workers could simply not pay their dues. The nucleus of a new branch

\(^1\)Ibid., May 1931, p.12.

\(^2\)Ibid., May 1931, pp.11, 13, March 1933, p.12.

\(^3\)Ibid., October 1931, p.12.

\(^4\)Men who did their time 'on the hill', when interviewed, thought that company vetting of workers especially at the steelworks extended as far as 'spying' on the activities of the unemployed.

persisted, though tenuously, in the spun-pipe department and union officials hoping to reconstruct the branch in 1932 concentrated their efforts in this department and in the 10 inch merchant mill which was transferred from Lithgow to Port Kembla in 1932. An appeal was made in September 1932 by the FIA executive for the restoration of the 7s industry allowance which had been lost in 1930. Their eventual success rejuvenated dispirited local unionists and led to an attempt by the State Executive to re-establish the Port Kembla branch.

In the election of branch officials conducted by members of the state executive, the previous secretary, Ward, was defeated by a more militant nominee of Irish descent, T. (Paddy) McDonald. The defeat of Ward was indicative of the changing mood amongst unionists. In 1931 he had been elected president of the Illawarra Trades and Labor Council and though unemployed for long periods he struggled to hold the branch together. Ward worked for the jobless but, unlike McDonald, he did not align himself with the more radical unemployed protest movement which reached its peak during the summer of 1931.

Individually then, unions were pre-occupied with their internal affairs and could offer little opposition to wage-cuts or the erosion of working conditions. Collectively their achievements were meagre. Established to co-ordinate and direct union activities in the district, the Illawarra Trades and Labor Council tended after 1930 to function merely as a sounding board for worker discontent and its inaction

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2 There were 117 ballot papers issued and 113 returned. McDonald received 68 votes, Ward 42, and three were informal. See Merritt, *A History of the Federated Ironworkers' Association of Australia, 1909-1952*, pp.177-8.

3 See Chapter Three, pp.115-49.
was an indication of the confusion among member unions. The council passed resolutions condemning the imposition of a ls in the pound tax on all wages as iniquitous,\(^1\) criticised the lack of organised unions at the steelworks and advocated a bounty on all bunker coal not purchased in Australia.\(^2\) From June 1930 onwards the bulk of the council's deliberations concerned not the workers but the workless.

The smaller and less organised unions continued, however, until 1931, to seek the support of the Trades and Labor Council. In November 1930, for example, the South Coast Branch of the Printing Industry Employees' Union of Australia (PIEUA) voted to affiliate with the council so as 'to provide a means of safeguarding our interests'\(^3\) and in the hope that the council would encourage unions to support local printers. In the same month the newly constituted South Coast Meat Employees' Union affiliated in an effort to obtain more support for their attempt to prevent local butchers from supplying Sydney shops with meat while that city's slaughtermen were on strike.\(^4\) The more general trend, however, was towards disaffiliation. Some unions, such as the individual mine lodges, ceased to send delegates because they could no longer pay the affiliation fee. Others broke with the council because it no longer appeared capable of offering any real assistance. G.W. Sloan, representative of the watersiders, resigned from the council because, he said, 'it had in no way functioned for this Branch'.\(^5\) With some misgivings the watersiders elected a new delegate, H. McEvoy, to the council. At the same time, however, they issued an ultimatum: if the council failed to assist the union in its struggle to have its members admitted to work on the company

\(^1\)Record Book, 23 May 1933.
\(^2\)Illawarra Mercury, 8 July 1933.
\(^3\)Ibid., 7 November 1930.
\(^4\)Ibid., 28 November 1930.
\(^5\)South Coast Branch of the Waterside Workers' Federation Minute Books, 31 July 1931.
jetties at Port Kembla they would withdraw from the council.\(^1\) Before it could do so, the Trades and Labor Council ceased to function. After 1931 the council continued as a paper body only. The volatile, energetic and now unpaid council secretary, S. (Steve) Best remained at his post throughout the depression. Best, himself on the dole, was a vigorous and consistent advocate for the unemployed. He led demonstrations and protest marches, filed petitions, wrote a volume of letters denouncing what he described as the callous indifference of governments to the needs of the unemployed. He was the first unemployed man arrested in Wollongong for leading an 'illegal' procession.\(^2\)

Union militancy during the depression was in the main confined to words. The depression crippled unions as collective bargaining instruments. Unemployment was too great a problem for the labour movement to tackle on its own; government intervention was needed.

Statistics make it possible to assess the affect of the depression on the life of workers in the Wollongong region. A general picture of earnings for the year ending 30 June 1933 may be gained from the Commonwealth Census. One breadwinner in five declared no income for the year. Of those declaring some earnings, twenty-four per cent received less than £52, fourteen per cent between £52 and £103, thirteen per cent more than £103 but less than £155. Of the twenty-eight per cent fortunate enough to earn more than £155 (or roughly the basic wage), twelve per cent received less than £259. Slightly more than one in ten had an income

\(^1\)Ibid.
\(^2\)See Chapter Three, pp.117-8.
exceeding £260. This was the situation when government-sponsored relief works were beginning to absorb the unemployed and industry was on the upturn. Local destitution was greatest in the coalmining villages of Northern Illawarra and Bulli where a quarter of the breadwinners declared no earnings and a total of seventy-five per cent earned less than £1 a week.

The shortage of adequate housing a serious problem in the 1920s worsened rapidly during the depression. Between 1921 and 1933 the number of private dwellings increased by 3,224 from 6,913 to 10,137, but this increase still did not keep pace with the influx of workers. Apart from the grave situation in the coalmining districts the housing shortage had the effect of maintaining average weekly rentals at their pre-depression levels. In Wollongong where the problem was

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1 This paragraph is based on Census of the Commonwealth of Australia, 1933. There is some discrepancy between those classified in the census as breadwinners in the 'Industry: Males and Females tables' (pp.110-125), and the number so classified in the 'Income Tables' (pp.141-150). Almost certainly the statistics mask the true level of destitution especially at Port Kembla. It is possible, for example, that workers from Sydney who camped at Port Kembla sent in returns to Sydney.

2 The number of dwellings at the 1921 and 1933 census and the increase by local government area was as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Local Government Area</th>
<th>1921</th>
<th>1933</th>
<th>Increase</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Central Illawarra</td>
<td>1,180</td>
<td>2,161</td>
<td>981</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern Illawarra</td>
<td>1,405</td>
<td>1,824</td>
<td>419</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bulli</td>
<td>2,923</td>
<td>3,558</td>
<td>635</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wollongong</td>
<td>1,405</td>
<td>2,594</td>
<td>1,189</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


3 Average weekly rentals by local government area for 1921 and 1933 were as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Local Government Area</th>
<th>1921</th>
<th>1933</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Central Illawarra</td>
<td>11s 10d</td>
<td>11s 9d</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern Illawarra</td>
<td>9s 11d</td>
<td>9s 3d</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bulli</td>
<td>14s 6d</td>
<td>16s 10d</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wollongong</td>
<td>12s 1d</td>
<td>9s 6d</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

most acute, rents remained at the point reached after the opening of the steelworks in 1928.

The eviction of employees from their homes for non-payment of rent does not, however, seem to have been used by employers as a weapon against workers. Most mining companies allowed arrears to accumulate. The Mt Kembla management in 1934 waived all back rent owed by its employees.\(^1\) The more general procedure, however, was to garnishee wages when production resumed. At Port Kembla, Metal Manufactures, which had financed housing loans for employees, adjusted loan repayments downwards, extended the repayment period and waived rents during periods of unemployment.\(^2\) AIS erected huts for their workers, rented them at 3d per week and set aside an area to be used as a vegetable plot.\(^3\) Whether the motive for these examples of rent remission was charity or frank recognition that rents could not be collected and that they affected only a fraction of the workers is not the point; the stereotype of the uncompromisingly greedy landlord has not much substance in depressed Wollongong.

In the Wollongong mining villages those who received most work were those who least needed it. The seniority custom favoured men who had lived in the district for some time. Such men had established homes and found it less difficult than most to lower expectations to those more appropriate to a subsistence economy. The house-cow, vegetable garden, fowl-yard and small fishing boat were part of a way of life that had been developed to offset irregular employment. Conversely, the seniority clause operated against the recent British immigrant and against the younger married man with children. At Port Kembla, apart from a small group of skilled tradesmen who had begun work in the copper industry in the early 1920s, few workers had been able to establish anything more than a rudimentary household. It was these men who suffered most during the long periods of unemployment which soon engulfed them.

\(^1\) Record Book, 14 March 1934, 18 February 1935.
\(^2\) Metal Manufactures Directors' Minutes (company files), 10 June 1931.
\(^3\) Illawarra Mercury, 8, 15 May 1931.
CHAPTER THREE

THE UNEMPLOYED: 1930-3

During the 1920s Wollongong workers had come to accept periods of unemployment as a fact of life. Until 1928, when the loss of markets by southern collieries resulted in the retrenchment of coalminers, such unemployment as existed was able to be absorbed by public works schemes. ¹ Between 1930 and 1932, however, the number of men out of work reached unprecedented proportions. By mid-1932 there were 6,900 men, or roughly one-third of the male work-force, registered as unemployed. ² A year later 4,508 Wollongong workers declared, in Commonwealth Census returns, that they were currently looking for work. ³ These statistics, particularly the census figures, almost certainly hide the true level of unemployment. Nevertheless, they indicate in crude terms the pressure now placed on existing sources of relief.

In the early months of 1930 the relief of distressed workers remained a local responsibility. The first line of defence was the combined resources of the family and neighbours whose recognition of need was immediate and personal. The loss of work by the breadwinner put pressure upon his wife and older children to seek work. Some married women, who accepted separation from their husbands and children as a sacrifice necessary for the general well being of the family, were able to find work in Sydney as domestic servants. ⁴ Available statistics do not reveal whether the average number of wage earners per family rose or fell during

¹See Chapter One, pp.47-53.
²N.S.W. Industrial Gazette, Vol.xlix, p.1097.
⁴Interview with Mrs J. McQuire, 4 February 1973.
the depression. In the 1933 Commonwealth Census, however, close to 450 women declared themselves to be unemployed. ¹

It seems likely, therefore, that the combined employment prospects of the family were little better than those of the breadwinner. Moreover, the charity of friends and neighbours, since it depended as much upon the whim of the giver as upon the need of the receiver, was too disorganised to have any real impact. At best, most families seem to have been able to survive on their own resources for little more than a few months.

The second line of defence was the local community - the established private relief organisations or the public agencies financed partly out of rate revenues and partly from local contributions. In Wollongong social assistance available to the poor was limited to the religious charities. Churches established unemployment funds to help 'local people in need'. ² The Methodist congregation was asked to provide a meal a day or week according to their means, ³ while the Salvation Army and St Vincent de Paul Society distributed rations and clothing to needy families. ⁴ In the main, however, the religious charities sought to care for their own. To a large extent their inability to offer much help is a further commentary upon the unplanned haphazard growth of the town. The transformation of Wollongong from a country service centre to a steeltown was not accompanied by any expansion in the social activities of the churches. The Catholic church, for example, remained part of the Sydney diocese and was capable of no local initiative which required substantial expenditure. Protestant church councils reflected the thinking of the old 'country' order and not the new industrial one. Moreover,

² Illawarra Mercury, 15 April 1930; Church Minute Book (St Michael's Anglican Church, Wollongong), 28 April 1931, 20 April 1932, 26 April 1933.
³ Illawarra Mercury, 15 April 1930.
⁴ Ibid., 13 June 1930.
the distress among their own congregations was enough to absorb any resources they were able to muster for relief.\(^1\) Their efforts, furthermore, secured only a half-hearted response from local businessmen.

Like most governments the New South Wales Government was slow to apprehend the size of the economic problem which confronted it. Consequently, legislation for the relief of unemployment reflected the current belief that a slight readjustment in economic relationships was all that was required. The Bavin government imposed extra taxation to create funds for food relief schemes and for the financing of relief works. Commonly known as a wages' tax it was a levy of 3d in the £ upon all wages and income. The New South Wales government then created a skeleton organisation to grapple with the problem. To administer the fund an Unemployment Relief Council was appointed. Food relief depots were established throughout the state to distribute rations to the unemployed.\(^2\) But while the government formulated its relief programme the demands of the unemployed grew. The initiative for the moment clearly rested with the civic leaders within each local community.

Local authorities had little money and therefore in practice, were ineffectual. The Central Illawarra Municipality offered negligible assistance to its unemployed. In 1929 the council reverted to what town clerk W.J. Macken colourfully described as 'a pick and shovel policy'\(^3\) which was more concerned with balancing the budget than with providing relief.\(^4\) For this reason the increasing number of

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\(^1\) Documentary evidence of the churches' role in relief schemes is sparse. Of some use for writing this paragraph were:
Church Minute Books (St Michael's Anglican Church, Wollongong), 1872-1946; Parish News (Osborne Memorial Church of St Luke's, Dapto and All Saints', Albion Park), September 1922-May 1940; St Luke's Women's Parochial Guild Minute Book, 18 September 1925 to 19 February 1935.


\(^3\) Central Illawarra Municipality Minute Books, 12 December 1929.

\(^4\) Ibid., 7 December 1929, 8 February and 6 June 1930.
unemployed in the developing industrial complex at Port Kembla appealed to the nearby Wollongong Municipality for help. Though not faced with an economic crisis of the magnitude which confronted the new industrial area its prosperity was more apparent than real. A Mayoral Relief Fund established in 1926 was exhausted within two years by the demands of destitute coalminers. Council policy for assisting the unemployed, as far as it had one, aimed at providing work for 'householders'. In large measure this was a secular version of the position adopted by the churches and was based on the assumption that existing unemployment was simply another visitation of the periodic bouts of work scarcity which had beset the district throughout the 1920s. W.L. (Bill) Howarth, the conservative Wollongong mayor, publicly disclaimed council responsibility for 'those who migrated from town to town' and demanded that the steelworks accept some of the responsibility for the increasing number of unemployed entering the district.

Howarth's persistent refusal to accept responsibility for migratory unemployed drew sharp criticism from local labour spokesmen who demanded that the council play a more active part in alleviating distress. In answer to a more general demand for action, the council announced a scheme which it declared would encompass all unemployed and eliminate the previous distinction between local and migratory unemployed. The proposal, like many local attempts to grapple with the problem of increasing unemployment was laudable though ill-conceived and impractical. The inescapable problem was money. The council had previously declared itself financially unable to offer employment on council work. To finance his scheme, therefore, Howarth

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1 *Illawarra Mercury*, 28 November 1928.
2 Wollongong Municipality Minute Books, 7 December 1928.
3 *Illawarra Mercury*, 15 April 1930.
4 Ibid., 13, 20 June 1930.
5 Ibid., 15 April 1930.
argued that the cost should be voluntarily borne by the community. Employers and employees were asked to contribute at unspecified intervals to an unemployment fund. Community contributions were to be subsidised by the council and, it was hoped, by the State Government.¹

Support for the council scheme was negligible. Apart from the Wollongong Traders' Association which was willing to support any scheme to rejuvenate spending, employers chose to ignore the proposal.² Whatever chances the scheme had of obtaining any degree of worker support were destroyed when council spokesmen, acknowledging the likelihood that lack of funds would cripple their project, suggested the unemployed should accept £2 a week, the minimum income permitted applicants for relief rations. Neither union officials nor unemployed leaders were willing to accept this proposition. Speaking for coalminers, already contributing twelve and a half per cent of their wage to sustain locked-out northern miners, Lowden denounced the scheme as an endeavour to shift the burden of relief to those least able to bear it.³ A meeting of the unemployed ridiculed the plan and declared itself against any suggestion that the unemployed should accept less than the basic wage.⁴

After the poor reception given to its relief scheme the Council abdicated all responsibility to the voluntary charitable organisations. In June, however, at the federal Government's request it again summoned a public meeting to consider the co-ordination of food and clothing distribution. Apparently smarting from the adverse reaction to his earlier scheme, Howarth restated his original distinction between local and migratory unemployed. Indeed, in the course of debate he narrowed still further his definition of 'local' unemployed so that it encompassed only rate-payers.⁵ To these

¹Ibid., 22 April 1930.
²Ibid.
³Ibid., 15 April 1930.
⁴Ibid., 8, 15 April 1930.
⁵Ibid., 13 June 1930.
'citizens' Howarth offered, upon formal application, the charitable assistance of a Citizens' Relief Committee, an organisation composed of representatives of the churches and public bodies.¹ Though he later widened this definition of citizenship to include householders of three to six months residence Howarth continued to regard transients as a federal or state responsibility. This was an attitude which many workers shared. Every transient who entered the district was one more competitor for available work.

Towards the end of June 1930, as the coal mines began to suffer from the renewed competition of northern mines, the number of unemployed increased dramatically and opposition to Howarth's policy escalated. The mayor's abrasive personality sharpened the conflict. Denouncing criticism by the unemployed as ill-informed, he blamed the unresponsive and obstructive attitude of the unemployed for the eventual shelving of the voluntary scheme in April.² His further demand that the collection of food and clothing be restricted to 'authorised' persons was interpreted as a deliberate attack upon the unemployed relief ventures of the labour movement.³ Moreover, the discontent of the unemployed gathered momentum when Howarth publicly proclaimed what many had long suspected: that the Council's prime concern was to keep the jobless off the streets and if possible to isolate them on the outskirts of the township. In April, when the Illawarra Trades and Labor Council asked that a camping ground be set aside for the unemployed, Howarth side-stepped the request and suggested a site at Port Kembla away from permanent settlement.⁴ Thereafter, he refused to debate the issue.⁵ Although unwilling to accept delegations from the unemployed, it was not his aim to antagonise the coalminers

¹Ibid.
²Ibid., 20 June 1930.
³Ibid.
⁴Wollongong Municipality Minute Books, 7 April 1930.
⁵Ibid., 19 June 1930.
and he eventually accepted Lowden as a negotiator. He
remained, nevertheless, hard to shift and continued to
disclaim responsibility for transients. Despite abundant
evidence to the contrary Howarth denied that 'bona fide' 1
local residents were among the homeless. If there were any
he preferred to arrange housing for them rather than
establish an unemployed camp within the township. 2

To the unemployed Howarth's policy appeared inhumane and
based on a stubborn refusal to accept the realities of
changing local circumstances. He was, declared R. (Robert)
Shayler, an itinerant communist organiser,

...hiding the nasty and ugly blots that appear
around this district, that was renowned for its
scenery. Wollongong is now a steel town, and
must produce an environment like all other
steel towns the world over - that is hospitals,
chemist shops, soup kitchen [sic] and slums etc.,
in abundance which are evidence of a decayed and
dying system.

This is the price we must pay for the
highest expression of 'civilization', namely,
steel production; and you, Mr Mayor, cannot
escape these things under this system. 3

Howarth, however, was not rejecting industrialism as
impractical or necessarily evil. Rather he was moving towards
advocating an embargo on internal migration until better
times returned. Movement from the cities to rural areas was
common in the early years of the depression but since
agriculture was as depressed as industry, 'back to the land',
despite its bucolic appeal was no general solution to
joblessness. In some respects the Wollongong district
appeared to offer as good a compromise as any other New South
Wales town. By settling on the outskirts of the township
the unemployed could attempt to live off the land and, at
the same time, be close to an industrial complex and possible
employment.

1 Ibid.
2 Ibid.
3 Illawarra Mercury, 27 June 1930.
Howarth's attitude to the unemployed was not shared by the remaining local authorities within the district. Both the municipality of Northern Illawarra and the Bulli Shire established and maintained camps for the homeless. At Port Kembla, where an acute housing shortage accentuated the problem, municipal leaders, though willing to provide a camping site, were reluctant to maintain or supervise it. They considered that this task would be best carried out by some religious organisation. However, a direct appeal to the Salvation Army failed to produce a firm commitment and the council then called for government financial assistance. Encouraged on the one hand by promised government financial aid and apprehensive lest unauthorised camps should mushroom, the municipality decided to construct a camp for single men and another for married couples. Each was maintained from council funds and supervised by a camp committee whose formation the council directed and which it assisted to draw up a set of camp regulations.

A further yardstick by which the unemployed could gauge the sympathy of local authorities was the readiness with which they used loan-funds to provide relief work. Apart from employing a gang of 'citizens', the Wollongong Council refused to countenance any expenditure from its loan fund to provide work for the unemployed. In contrast, the Northern Illawarra Municipality, in April 1930, voted to distribute the remaining loan work amongst the unemployed. Work was to be rationed and each worker was to receive twenty days' employment. The unemployed were asked to operate their own employment roster.

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1 Northern Illawarra Municipality Minute Books, 3 June 1930; Bulli Shire Minute Books, 14 July 1930.  
2 Central Illawarra Municipality Minute Books, 14 May 1930.  
3 Ibid., 11 June 1930.  
4 Illawarra Mercury, 15 April 1930.  
5 Northern Illawarra Municipality Minute Books, 22 April 1930.  
6 Ibid.
For the Bulli Shire Council the problem of unemployment and the need to provide relief was delayed until mid-1930. The shire council had, during this six months' respite, gained a reputation for an enlightened approach to workers' problems. Throughout the early months of 1930 it had refused to increase the working hours of its employees from forty-four to forty-eight hours per week in accordance with the Industrial Arbitration (Eight hours' Act 1930) and the Public Services (Salaries Reduction) Act. Instead it paid forty-eight hours' wages for forty-four hours' work.\(^1\) In so doing it drew upon itself the criticism of both the New South Wales Local Government Association and the Main Roads Board which alleged that the council was misusing government funds by paying above award rates.\(^2\) The criticisms were ignored and, when confronted in June with an increasing number of unemployed, the council at first endeavoured to continue its benevolent policy. Following the example of Northern Illawarra the Bulli Shire recognised a work register submitted to it by the unemployed and voted to accept labour exclusively from this source.\(^3\) But in July the council conceded the impossibility of preserving the award wages of permanent employees and at the same time provide work for the jobless. Consequently permanent staff were asked to forego marginal rates and to accept forty-four hours' pay for forty-four hours' work,\(^4\) and unemployed work was rationed.\(^5\)

The breakdown of local resources, public and private, Government inaction and the inadequacy of food rations left the unemployed little choice but to provide their own relief. In the beginning, direction was given by the existing labour organisations such as the Trades and Labor Council, the

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\(^{1}\) Bulli Shire Minute Books, 3 February, 17 March, 14 April 1930; Sydney Morning Herald, 7 April 1930.

\(^{2}\) Bulli Shire Minute Books, 14 April 1930.

\(^{3}\) Ibid., 23 June 1930.

\(^{4}\) Ibid., 21, 28 July 1930.

\(^{5}\) Ibid., 28 July 1930.
Miners' Federation and to a lesser degree by the ALP branches. In March 1930 the Illawarra Trades and Labor Council organised a local branch of the One Big Union of the Unemployed whose proclaimed objective was to safeguard employment at trade union rates for its members. However, in a short time a new set of leaders emerged from the ranks of the unemployed. These leaders were newcomers to the district and, in the main, convinced communists. The most belligerent of them was Robert Shayler. Coming to Wollongong from Sydney, late in 1929, Shayler quickly gained a reputation for his outspoken defence of the unemployed. He became secretary of the Wollongong One Big Union of the Unemployed.

In May he launched a South Coast division of the Unemployed Workers' Movement, one of a number of communist party organisations formed, in accordance with Comintern directions issued in 1926, 'to act as a bridge to the masses'. Shayler poured Marxist scorn on what he saw as the platitudinous patronage of the local authorities. Soup kitchens, doles and clothing depots were, in his view, of little benefit to the unemployed. They hindered the development of working class consciousness. Unemployment, he continued, was now a permanent feature of the capitalist system and the only real solution was a radical reconstruction of society. For Shayler the cause of the depression was clear enough: improved methods of production had created a permanent unemployed army; mechanisation had solved the problem of production but not the difficulty of distribution.

Such arguments alarmed administrators, strengthened their belief that only 'genuine' residents deserved assistance and precipitated a confrontation between Shayler and Howarth. Shayler labelled the Wollongong mayor the 'Mussolini of the South Coast' and alleged that Howarth had usurped the authority of the council and established a personal dictatorship. Had he not personally refused to sanction an

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1 Illawarra Mercury, 30 March 1930.
2 Ibid., 27 June 1930.
3 Ibid., 27 January 1930.
unemployed camp within the municipality, declined to hear unemployed deputations and insisted on perpetuating the myth that there were no Wollongong unemployed in need of housing? Shayler referred to other municipalities which were providing camp sites, and co-operating fully with the unemployed at a time when the Wollongong workless were being evicted from their homes.¹

Howarth's persistent refusal to hear deputations from the unemployed seemed to confirm a growing suspicion among the jobless that relief policies were influenced by official reluctance to help those who were thought to be undeserving. In an open letter to Howarth complaining of political bias in the treatment of the unemployed, Shayler asked:

...what is our crime? If we say or do anything that the law does not allow we can be prosecuted. What more do you want? Is not your argument in its final analysis a material one? Are you not a share partner in this framework called capitalism, a system that exists on the degradation of men, women and children, and no amount of charity is going to solve the problem.

It is for expressing our opinion that we are penalised today, for we are out of harmony with the existing code of ethics. Every age has had its social reformers persecuted and to the eternal credit of the rebels who revolted against the petty tyrants of the day, they have always risen to the occasion of facing the situation and triumphing over their tyrants. We will triumph over ours, but in doing so we realise that some will have to pay the penalty.²

Shayler frequently ran to excess in his diatribes against local authorities. He demanded that the Wollongong Council recognise the harsh realities of unemployment and ridiculed official reluctance to enter into public debate with the unemployed. He also challenged Howarth in the name of 'human brotherhood' to throw light on

...the dark spots of civilisation and don't hide your head like an ostrich in the sand. Admit that you cannot meet our argument in the open, and that the weapon you intend to use is the weapon that all tyrants have used in the

¹South Coast Times, 9 May 1930; Illawarra Mercury, 27 June 1930.

²Illawarra Mercury, 11 July 1930.
past, that is, suppression, gaol and the
hangman's rope. And in the words of a man
that struck terror into the minds of some of
the greatest tyrants that ruled England in the
last century, John Boyle O'Reilly, when he
said, 'Ours is a noble doctrine; it teaches
all are brothers; it teaches all are free.
Our voices will be heard.'

Howarth countered such outbursts by pointing to their
destructive rather than constructive intent and called for
greater co-operation from the unemployed.

There was a degree of desperation in Howarth's appeals
for by mid-winter municipal relief - private and public -
was at the end of its resources. Those unemployed who had
hitherto been dependent on the local community, were now
compelled to turn to self-help ventures. Since April, the
Unemployed Workers' Movement, despite Shayler's opposition to
any form of charitable aid, developed an extensive relief
programme. The movement was in fact the first self-help
organisation in the field pre-dating the more orthodox and
more selective aid distributors, the Citizens' Relief
Associations. For this reason the Unemployed Workers'
Movement enjoyed an immediate and extraordinary growth. In
May 1930 leaders claimed a membership of 3,000. As the
movement developed, three objectives became clear: self-help,
relief and employment at trade union rates. It was later to
add a fourth - political action. Members throughout the
district were organised into fourteen branches. Each branch
elected two representatives to sit on a district council
which in turn sent delegates to a state council in Sydney.

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1 Ibid., 27 June 1930. John Boyle O'Reilly (1844-90), was an
Irish-American. An ardent revolutionist he became a member
of the Fenian organisation known as the Irish Republican
Brotherhood. He was transported in 1867 to Bunbury, Western
Australia. He subsequently escaped and organised an
expedition which rescued all the Irish military political
prisoners from the Western Australia convict establishments
(1876). That Shayler should appeal in the words of an Irish-
Catholic, revolutionist is indicative of widespread support
among militant labour for the 'Irish cause'.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid., 2 May 1930.

4 Ibid.
As a rule, though not invariably, executive control of the branches was in the hands of communists. Within this structure, individual branches were fully autonomous: size and organisation varied from branch to branch. There were in most cases no dues although some branches introduced a voluntary levy of 1d a week.¹

The tightly knit homogeneous mining communities which nurtured the Unemployed Workers' Movement during the winter months of 1930 were well adapted for co-operative ventures. Isolated settlements built around the pits which gave them life, the mining villages had over the years developed a high degree of social organisation. More than any single institution the union provided this strong sense of community. It was the union which in times of recession found relief work for redundant miners, which organised and distributed food relief and which provided some degree of organisation for the unemployed. It was this structure and tradition of self-help which the Unemployed Workers' Movement utilised in its relief programme.²

The range and success of these efforts does much to explain why, despite niggardly government relief, there was no widespread starvation on the coalfields. Each unit of the Unemployed Workers' Movement leased, or more commonly simply used, crown land for communal vegetable plots which provided food both for destitute families and soup kitchens. Teams of men operated small fishing boats or caught rabbits. To house the homeless, groups of miners constructed bush settlements of 'white cities' on the hill slopes above the mining villages. Bush timber was felled and used for the framework. To this rough frame old cement bags were fixed with clouts and, after being soaked several times and left to dry hard in the sun, were painted white with lime. Sassafras levelled with an adze provided the floorboards and old galvanised iron the roof. Sewing guilds were established in

¹Interviews with Mr D. Timmins, Mr L. Boardman, Mr H. Blacklock and Mr A. Speed.

²For a fuller account of the social role of the miners' lodges see Chapter One, pp. 47-53 and also DMB, 17-18 June 1930.
disused shops, private homes or sometimes old sheds to help clothe the ragged.\(^1\)

Communal spirit rather than communism was the movement's hallmark. So well did its self-help programme operate that Howarth, the movement's chief antagonist, denounced it as 'like the Salvation Army adding to its strength by soup kitchen conversions'.\(^2\) Self-help, however, often took the form of organised criminality. Before regulations governing dole distribution were tightened during 1931-2, bicycle troops were organised. A team of men set out on a grand tour of dole depots collecting rations as they went and returning home with provisions for general distribution. Another group systematically plundered railway waggons. One member of the group now recalls his involvement in the operation:

In the first place something went wrong with the dole and I had to go and see a man named Butlin who was in charge of the relief depot and I had to go to Wollongong. I walked from Coledale to Wollongong, where I met Butlin and we argued and argued. Anyway it got that way that trouble started. Windows were smashed, chairs were broken up and the police came and arrested me and sent word that I was arrested in Wollongong to Fred Lowden, President [of the Southern District] of the Miners' Federation. He was telephoned by a man named Mullins and he came and bailed me out. I was tried and got nine days for disorderly conduct and damage to Government property. Of course, I did my nine days and after that I knew the people around about, friends of mine for years, who were jumping the railways for coal. I jumped the railways before I went on the track, for different stuff. So I just went on my own and jumped them. They would go one night and I would go another night and gradually we merged together. I told them, 'There is too much stuff going we've got to get caught.' Foodstuffs and clothing were the main things we got. We'd go to Scarborough, to the signal box, where the freights slowed up as they came out of the tunnel. Then threw them off between Coledale and Austinmer and collect them later and take them up the bush. There was one night we got a lot of stuff banked up ready to throw off and the train stopped at Coledale Station, which it had never done before. The guard walked along the line and there were all these boxes on

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\(^1\)Interviews with Mr H. Blacklock, Mr D. Timmins, Mr L. Boardman and Mr J. McQuire.

\(^2\)South Coast Times, 7 July 1932.
top of the tarpaulin. They knew that it was
going off between Coledale and Austinmer. This
looked like the end of it. We did a couple more
but about a fortnight afterwards they came and
searched the places. There was nothing at my
place. Mine was all buried in the bush; tobacco,
tea, sugar. The only thing I felt sorry for was
that there was a picnic parcel sent down to some
campers at Kiama among the stuff. We had plenty
of food while that was going on. Eventually the
police came and searched. I was up the bush.
They had the other three; Jack, Bud and Dick, and
of course I was the last one to be picked up.¹

The Unemployed Workers' Movement also became notorious
for its opposition to the eviction of workers from their homes
for non-payment of rent. A common tactic was to prevent the
landlord's agents from shifting the tenant's furniture by
placing a twenty-four hour picket on the house. If a landlord
attempted to sell a house and use this as a justification for
evicting a tenant the Unemployed Workers' Movement used a
series of stratagems to prevent a sale. Where a public auction
was held its 'heavy-weights' threatened prospective buyers and
hinted that they might set fire to the house if the auction
continued. A final ruse of the movement's men was to outbid
all others and, when the crowd dispersed, declare inability to
pay. Such tactics brought them into conflict with the police
and earned them a reputation as troublemakers. In
justification of these illegal tactics their spokesmen declared
that the dole was 'a system designed to create criminals'.²

In a sense these multifarious activities indicate that
the poor of Wollongong were better able to tighten their
belts and fend for themselves in hard times than those of
most areas in Australia. A further example of the better
resources that the mining communitie· had built up for
themselves were the co-operative stores to be found
throughout the coalfields. From September 1930 the
co-operative stores endeavoured to protect the unemployed from
the full harshness of relief regulations. An applicant could

¹Recorded interview with Mr D. Timmins, 4 August 1971.

²This paragraph is based on a series of interviews. Especially
useful were those with Mr F.H. Finch, Mr D. Timmins and
Mr A. Speed. See also Northern Illawarra Minute Books,
15 July, 19 July 1932 for material on evictions.
receive the dole only after he had been unemployed for fourteen days and registered for seven at the nearest Labour Exchange. Here he was issued with his registration card to be presented at his Food Relief Depot on the appointed day. Initially the food relief depots were few and far between and men were required to walk considerable distances, often a hardship in itself. Need, not unemployment, was the criterion for relief. To qualify, an unemployed man had to realise all property save his house. Further, income over a fixed upper limit disqualified an applicant, and the earnings of each member of the family were taken into account when calculating such income. Although separate coupons were issued for presentation to the butcher, baker and grocer, the co-operative stores allowed the unemployed to 'eat out' the dole as they pleased. It was not until November 1932 that this practice became more general throughout the state. It was then that a cash order system replaced the issue of food coupons and a wider choice of foods were offered and dole recipients were given more freedom in deciding how and where they would spend their allowance.

The degree of organised self-help on the coalfields was not to be found among the transient unemployed. No reliable census of transients was ever made although it was commonly estimated in 1930 that their number had reached 1,000 and that by 1934 this number had doubled. At the outset the migrants were, in the main, single men drawn to the district by the hope of finding work at the steelworks. Increasingly, however, the district attracted families not so much searching for work as fleeing from its absence in their home towns and


2 Central Illawarra Municipality Minute Books, 9 April 1930; Illawarra Mercury, 11 February 1934; Record Book, 14 May 1934.

3 See Appendix D: Population Change in Wollongong, 1921-33 (Figures 2 and 3), pp.345-50; Commonwealth Census, 1933.
hoping to live off the land. In early 1934, a clergyman who visited the major unemployed camps estimated that one in three of the inhabitants were children under sixteen years of age.

Conditions of life among the transients in the camps, both official and unofficial, were primitive, nowhere more so than at Port Kembla. Shacks and huts appeared almost overnight. They were made of packing cases, pieces of corrugated iron, hessian and whatever lengths of timber could be scrounged or stolen. Most were without water supplies and lacked adequate sanitation: there was no collection of garbage, privies were open and improvised and inadequate in number. There was only sporadic shelter against the elements and during winter months the areas surrounding the humpies became disease-ridden bogs. Especially notorious was the Flinders Street camp. It grew up on the only available vacant land within view of 'the hill', where men stood all day in the hope of getting a few days' work at the steelworks. The humpies huddled in a swampy drainage easement where typhoid and dysentery were endemic. In the summer months, when heat and flies combined to spread infection, children were especially susceptible to gastric disorders.

The official camp sites were only marginally better. Early in 1931 the Municipality of Central Illawarra admitted its failure to restrict humpy settlement to the assigned camping areas and threatened, failing government financial aid, to leave the transients to their own devices. As an immediate step, the council voted to demolish all humpies still at the construction stage and also existing structures which failed to comply with basic health standards. Nevertheless, construction continued to outstrip demolition. Twelve months later the council engineer recommended that.

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1 *The Australian Worker*, Monthly Reports, January 1931.
2 Record Book, 14 May 1934.
3 Central Illawarra Municipality Minute Books, 9 January 1931.
...in view of the great danger of an outbreak of disease and for the safety of the campers themselves it would be desirable to concentrate the camps in a position where a proper sanitary service could be provided and some sort of supervision exercised.\(^1\)

This proposition was accepted and a more vigorous effort was made to exercise some control over the transients. To begin with a camp inspector was appointed. He was charged with compiling a register of all camps, preventing the establishment of new humpies, enforcing existing health regulations as they applied to camps and removing all camps which did not meet council's requirements.\(^2\) Moreover, the council made it clear that such camps as existed were for unemployed persons only: unmarried occupants of humpies in regular work were to be given twenty-four hours' notice to find other accommodation. The council offered to provide sanitary services for 6d a week, but warned that the service would be withdrawn if employed persons continued to occupy camps in the district.\(^3\)

Yet despite increased vigilance the number of bag shanties continued to grow and conditions in the camping areas worsened. Moreover, the cold, wet winter of 1932 brought sickness, disease and death to the camps. Diphtheria was rampant among children and the number of infant deaths caused by lung disorders rose sharply.\(^4\)

\(^1\)Ibid., 13 January 1932.

\(^2\)Ibid., 10 February 1932.

\(^3\)Ibid., 28 January 1932.

\(^4\)Eleven infants died from lung disorders in 1932. This was six more than in 1931 and seven more than in 1933. The number of infant deaths (all deaths in the first year of life) declined between 1928 and 1932. This decline, however, was matched by a comparable drop in the number of recorded live births. The infant mortality rate (number of infant deaths per 1,000 live births) shows a significant increase.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Live Births</th>
<th>Infant Deaths</th>
<th>Mortality Rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1928</td>
<td>693</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>47.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1930</td>
<td>678</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>47.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1932</td>
<td>609</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>50.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1934</td>
<td>635</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>55.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I am indebted to Miss K. Merrett who provided this information which she collated from the births and deaths registers held at the Bulli and Wollongong Registry Offices.
Alarmed by the now obvious deterioration in the health of the camp dwellers, the council called for a report from the Board of Health. The Board's enquiry recommended what the council had long advocated; stricter supervision and the removal of camps on private land or near residential areas. It was a further six months, however, before the recommendations were implemented. A new camp site, later known as the 'official camp' on the beach-front east of Comaditchy lagoon was selected. With more than two hundred and fifty 'camps' within its boundaries and with the handicap of limited finances the council faced an impossible task in attempting to shift the campers. The council began by demanding that Wollongong accept responsibility for its own destitute and establish its own camp. It also refused permits for the erection of new camps to 'residents' of other municipalities. Thereafter, council policy was to attempt a piecemeal relocation of humpies. The first proposal was to shift men with families from Flinders Street.

Resistance, however, was widespread. Families with few possessions were concerned to hold on to what they had. The new camp site was more distant from the steelworks and many felt that such a shift would lessen the possibility of finding work. In the case of single campers the council temporised; where persuasion failed, the administrators bided their time until men went on the track or abandoned their camps for any length of time. Their humpies were then burnt to the ground. The health inspector continued to visit the camp daily and disinfectant was sprayed around the more offensive pools of stagnant water which lay permanently around the camp, but in general it was made clear that scant assistance would be given to those determined to remain at Flinders Street.

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1 Central Illawarra Municipality Minute Books, 11 May, 31 March 1932.
2 Ibid., 28 June 1932.
3 Ibid., 14 June 1933.
4 Interview with Mr F.H. Finch who, after 1932, was responsible to the council for the control of camps within the municipality.
5 Central Illawarra Municipality Minute Books, 14 June 1933.
Conversely, to avoid a repetition of the Flinders Street plague-spot, closer attention was paid to the supervision of the new camp. The council supplied water, constructed toilet blocks, provided a few showers and endeavoured to engender some sort of community spirit by organising competitions and awarding prizes to the best sections of the camp. ¹

The debate throughout 1932 and 1933 on how best to cope with the humpy settlements coupled with the establishment of the official camp reflects not only the improving economic climate, but also the council's changing attitude towards the unemployed. Whereas previously it was inclined to denigrate the jobless as an unwanted drain upon its finances the council came to see them as a nucleus for a reconstructed industrial community at Port Kembla. Increasingly it began to concern itself with 'turning tramps into taxpayers'. A logical first step was the provision of more permanent housing, and from mid-1933 onwards the council requested government assistance for its own projects. The new policy was justified in the following terms:

...housing in a district like Central Illawarra with an assured population is the most direct and practical means of improving the general standard of living and finding work for the unemployed, the work being found not only in building operations but also in supplying the following: a) Building materials and raw materials for the making of those materials, b) Furniture and fittings, c) Electric light water and other services, d) Household and personal necessities and comforts encouraged by living in decent homes.²

However, the suggestion that the State Government should construct 500 homes at an individual cost of £350 received curt consideration by a government overwhelmed by similar requests from harassed local authorities.³

Elsewhere in the district the supervision and control of humpy settlements was a lesser problem. Rather than create one major camp as Central Illawarra had done the remaining two

¹Interview with Mr F.H. Finch, 6 August 1971.
²Central Illawarra Municipality Minute Books, 8 November 1933.
³Ibid., 27 June, 8 November 1933.
local authorities sought to limit camp sizes. In December 1930 the Municipality of Northern Illawarra restricted the Fairy Meadow camp to twenty tents, each of which provided shelter for four men. Although it later provided a further ten tents, at no time were there more than seventy men in the camp.\[1\] Dispersal rather than concentration remained stated policy and camps on private land were condoned. However, the council insisted on the provision of adequate sanitation, and often forced benevolent landowners to evict campers.\[2\] The Bulli Shire was the most tolerant of the local authorities. It abandoned earlier attempts to shift the bush dwellers and established good relationships with campers in its district.\[3\] But for all local governments the degree of assistance offered the unemployed and especially to the transients had to be balanced against ratepayers' complaints that people were 'coming into the district to compete with local people who paid rates and carried the burden of control of the area'.\[4\]

The depression gave the unemployed plenty of time to think. Did their thoughts turn to a basic change in the economic system which had dealt with them so harshly? A growing number of Australians asked themselves this question – conservatives with fear and radicals with hope. Would the jobless organise themselves as the shock troops of revolution? Would left-wing political groups, notably the communists, do it for them?

The conservative business and professional men who controlled the Wollongong Council were vigilant in the defence of their entrenched position in relatively prosperous times. They proved even more so in times of financial crisis. The

\[1\] Northern Illawarra Municipality Minute Books, 16 December 1930.

\[2\] South Coast Times, 28 July 1933; Northern Illawarra Municipality Minute Books, 16 June 1933.

\[3\] Bulli Shire Minute Books, 5 January, 31 August 1931.

\[4\] Northern Illawarra Municipality Minute Books, 20 April 1931; Bulli Shire Minute Books, 6 March 1931.
nomination in 1928 of a full Labor ticket to contest the municipal elections drew sharp criticism from incumbent councillors. Workers, they claimed, lacked administrative experience and in any case politics should be kept out of local government. The attempts of the newly-formed Illawarra Trades and Labor Council to extend union coverage to unorganised workers and to co-ordinate union strength seemed to foreshadow an attempt to alter the social structure of the community. The first open clash between the Trades and Labor Council and the Wollongong Council occurred in November 1929 when the workers asked for the council's permission to commemorate the twelfth anniversary of the Russian revolution with a street procession. The request was rejected and the civic leaders asked for police assistance should its ban be ignored.1

The political conflict broadened when the council refused to allow a street march by the visiting Kurri-Kurri Pipe Band to collect aid for locked-out northern miners.2 A further application in February was rejected by Howarth without recourse to the full council.3 The band in fact played and the council prosecuted. Howarth refused the intercession of either the Trades and Labor Council or the Miners' Federation. Neither organisation, he asserted, was connected in any way with the men about to be prosecuted. The procession was a deliberate breach of the law and no acceptable excuse could be presented. The council subsequently endorsed Howarth's action with only one dissenting vote,4 although four aldermen had previously voted against any prosecution.5

The prosecution of the bandsmen brought a sharp rejoinder from F. (Fred) Lowden who warned that,

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1 Wollongong Municipality Minute Books, 7 November, 5 December 1929.
2 Ibid., 30 January 1930.
3 Ibid., 24 February 1930.
4 Ibid., 27 February, 13 March 1930.
5 Ibid., 11 March 1930.
...if the council persisted with the prosecutions then the gloves would be off; the miners and the whole of the trade unionists of the Coast will operate a black ban, May Day demonstration will be moved from Wollongong and every other weapon will be used.¹

The unemployed as consumers were able to withhold their purchasing power, and even this would hurt hard-up shopkeepers. Commercial interests were not prepared to put Lowden's threat to the test and charges against the bandsmen, though not those against J. (Jack) Hitchen the communist organiser who led the procession, were withdrawn.²

Hardly had the furore over the Kurri-Kurri bandsmen subsided when Howarth was confronted by the problem of what to do with the growing number of unemployed in the municipality. His reluctance to admit the reality of local unemployment, his refusal to provide shelter for the migratory unemployed and his unwillingness to hear unemployed deputations were interpreted as evidence of political bias and a denial of civil rights. The subsequent refusal of the council to sanction street meetings and processions of the unemployed 'to draw attention to their plight'³ confirmed this suspicion, as did Howarth's blunt declaration that all requests from the unemployed to hold street meetings should be 'absolutely refused'.⁴ Ostensibly the reason for his refusal was fear of the repercussions public street meetings might have on local retailers. Businessmen complained of loitering outside their premises by the unemployed and alleged that the latter were leaning against shop windows. Whatever the council's motives, after June 1930 they consistently refused all requests for street meetings in busy

¹Ibid. See also, 14 March 1930.

²Wollongong Municipality Health Inspector's Report Book, 22 April 1930. The health inspector was responsible for all prosecutions instigated by the council. See Wollongong Municipality Minute Books, 17 July 1930, for a statement of the health inspector's authority to prosecute.


⁴Ibid., 19 June 1930.
The council's policy was immediately challenged by a series of street meetings and processions. Charges were then laid against the leaders, a procedure based on the mistaken assumption that opposition to council policies was the work of a few 'obscure extremists', and that a brief show of strength would restore sanity. Instead, however, the prosecutions created a defensive situation in which worker and workless could unite in a common cause. The Trades and Labor Council initiated and co-ordinated the protest movement among workers. In late July the Council established a South Coast Free Speech Committee to preserve 'the right to express an opinion'. The committee received the support of all union leaders in the district and declared its determination to hold weekly demonstrations in defiance of the council.

Organised protest, directed and controlled by the new committee, began almost immediately. On 20 August, S. (Steve) Best, secretary of the Illawarra Trades and Labor Council, the president of the Federated Ironworkers' Association, J. (John) McDonald and the Waterside Workers' representative on the Free Speech Committee, E. (Ernest) Briemle, led a procession of 200 men marching four abreast along Crown Street, the main street of Wollongong. According to police reports the demonstration forced two cars to the wrong side of the road and another was compelled to slow down. Otherwise the protest was said to be orderly and well behaved.

As it had done previously the Council preferred charges

1Ibid., 30 June, 17 July 1930. The council initiated several prosecutions for loitering. See Wollongong Municipality Minute Books, 17 June 1930.

2Illawarra Mercury, 25 July 1930.

3Ibid.

4Ibid.

5Ibid., 24 August 1930.

6South Coast Times, 31 October 1930.
against the protest leaders who were convicted and fined.\(^1\) The court proceedings were not without incident. In convicting Briemle, the presiding Stipendiary Magistrate, A.E. Chapman, ignored the evidence of eight witnesses who testified that Briemle had taken no part in the procession. Briemle had earned the displeasure of the court by proclaiming his communist sympathies and by making an affirmation rather than swearing on the Bible. Moreover, Chapman's penalties exceeded those normally imposed. Whereas the usual default clause for a £2 fine was seven days, Chapman imposed two months. Protests by counsel at the severity of the judgement were peremptorily dismissed by Chapman who is reported to have replied that 'there is only one place for those who break the law'.\(^2\)

A **Labor Daily** editorial, most likely written by R. (Robert) Allen, secretary of the Wollongong Free Speech Committee, urged the government 'to determine who are and are not temperamentally and otherwise fitted to sit upon [sic] the Bench' and denounced Chapman for imposing a penalty of a vindictively severe character.\(^3\) Although the fines were later remitted on appeal, the immediate result of the prosecution was to intensify the ill feeling between the unemployed and the Council and to propel to the forefront a group of rank and file radicals and committed communists. The lines of the dispute were clearly drawn when the council, in a considered public statement, announced its policy for the regulation of street meetings. Street marches, in the council's view, interfered unduly with traffic and presented a 'grave danger to the public caused by the congregation of crowds of people...in some of the most congested streets'.\(^4\)

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\(^1\)Wollongong Municipality Minute Books, 25 August 1930. All three men were fined £2 and ordered to pay £3 3s professional costs and 8s court costs in default of two months imprisonment. See **South Coast Times**, 31 October 1930.

\(^2\)South Coast Times, 31 October 1930.

\(^3\)Labor Daily, 6 November 1930.

\(^4\)Wollongong Municipality Minute Books, 7 October 1930.
Having stated its objection the council enunciated formally and carefully its decision:

That in pursuance of powers vested in the Council by the provision of Section 249(K), 'to regulate the use by the public of the road', and Section 269 (1), 'to regulate traffic in public places', of the Local Government Act 1919, it is hereby resolved and directed that no person may hold or conduct a public meeting in any public street within this municipality or do such other acts that will cause the congregation of a crowd on public streets such as delivering a speech or an address from adjoining private land without having first obtained the written permission of this Council, and having in view the preservation of the rights of the public to use public streets for ordinary purposes, and the danger and inconvenience to traffic, which the congregation of a crowd entails, it is resolved that no permit may be issued for any public meeting to be held on Friday nights or late shopping nights at or near the intersection of Keira Street, Crown Street and Crown Lane, and it is further resolved that the Officers of this Council be authorized and directed to take such steps as may be necessary to carry this resolution into effect.¹

For a period of eighteen months following this proclamation of the council, the South Coast Free Speech Committee openly defied the ban and held weekly Friday night street meetings at the corner of Church and Crown Streets. Despite certain prosecution and probable imprisonment the committee had no difficulty finding speakers. While convictions were registered against the protestors in most cases, the fines were later remitted after appeal to the Minister of Justice, W.J. McKell. Accepting the view of his under-secretary that the demonstrators had only committed 'a technical breach'² McKell waived the fines in all cases presented to him. But as the proceedings were taken by the Wollongong Municipality and not the Justice Department he did not have the authority to set aside costs. Further, since the Free Speech Committee had declared against the payment of

¹Ibid.
²Attorney-General's File, 7/809 (New South Wales State Archives), 27 November 1930.
fines, imprisonment in the Wollongong lock-up was the normal expectation of soap box orators. Yet ultimately victory lay with the protesters. Their determination 'not to bow to the dictates of the spineless capitalist apologists on the Wollongong Council' proved greater than the latter's willingness to absorb the cost of litigation. The council complained bitterly that unduly long delays by the Attorney-General and Justice Department in hearing appeals caused it considerable inconvenience and expense. 2

During the eighteen months in which it pursued its policy regardless of costs the council remained convinced that only by a display of firmness could it hope to retain control of the streets. Communistic organisations which sought to undermine its authority 'by deliberate acts of defiance' deserved no sympathy and the Council urged the Minister of Justice not to remit any further penalties. 3 The minister, however, considered that the Wollongong by-law was 'apt to operate harshly' 4 and that the penalties imposed by the court 'did not always bear an altogether reasonable relationship to the gravity of the offence'. 5

As the free speech campaign gathered momentum in the latter months of 1930 there emerged a readily identifiable rank and file unemployed leadership. Previously, the degree of unity which existed among the unemployed had been supplied from above by trade union officials and especially by the Trades and Labor Council. The branches of the Unemployed Workers' Movement remained tied very much to the locality. The street demonstrations provided a platform for a hard core of activists.

1 Ibid., 14 January 1932.
2 Ibid., Letter from Wollongong Town Clerk to Under-Secretary of Justice, 7 June 1932.
3 Ibid., 7 April 1932.
4 Ibid.
5 Ibid., 13 January 1932.
By 1932 these leaders were so well known to the police that when they were arrested for speaking at free speech demonstrations the police considered fingerprints unnecessary.\(^1\) Few of these activists were, as Howarth alleged, outsiders. The majority claimed communist sympathies but this did not mean that most of them were from other districts. It is true that Jack Croft, a Corrimal miner, was the only man prosecuted to proclaim himself a native of Wollongong. Indeed, he went on to assert that his family had paid enough rates to allow him the right of free speech in the streets.\(^2\) Nevertheless, a considerable number of these new leaders had long associations with the district. Foremost in this latter category were a group of coalminers; Robert Allen, Pat McHenry, Paddy Malloy, Jack Hitchen and Jack Martin. All five men had, before the depression years, established a reputation for industrial militancy and had provided the nucleus of the MMM on the southern coalfield. Allen had been dismissed from the South Bulli Colliery in 1926 for what the police later claimed was 'persistent defiance of the management'.\(^3\) After a period of unemployment he was employed by the Labor Daily as its South Coast reporter and in 1928 had been prominent in the organisation of a local branch of the One Big Union of the Unemployed among displaced coalminers, earning for himself a reputation as 'a well known agitator against constitutional government'.\(^4\) Malloy, a colourful Scot, had a long record of militant activity dating back to 1899 when he was secretary of an anti-Boer War committee.\(^5\) During the depression Malloy worked intermittently for the Public Works Department at Port Kembla and was reported by the police to be a 'man who holds very

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1. Ibid., 19 January 1932.
2. Labor Daily, 30 October 1931.
4. Ibid.
extreme political views'. Cavilled out of the coalmines at the same time as Malloy, McHenry likewise spent brief periods of employment at the Port Kembla industries. When he was eventually laid-off in 1931 the employment officer noted that the company should 'be careful before re-employ' him. His home at Fairy Meadow was known locally as a meeting place for the Communist Party and the police knew him as a man who was willing to 'agitate strong revolutionary measures and continually advocate the overthrow of the present system of Government', but, apart from these habits was of quiet and orderly disposition. Hitchen, a Durham miner who migrated to Australia in the early 1920s was clearly the most revolutionary of the group. Most of his fellow communists thought him a fanatic. Always ready 'to declare the revolution on' Hitchen had constantly to be restrained by his more realistic colleagues. Combative in the extreme Hitchen seemed on occasions to pose as a working class martyr. After he was convicted in the early months of 1930 for abusive language he denounced a meeting of Miners' Federation which had paid his fine. He had to be forcibly removed.

There were several men associated with this group who fitted Howarth's definition of outsiders, namely those who came into the district after the establishment of the steelworks in 1928. Perhaps the most prominent was Ernest Briemle, a Swiss born naturalised Australian who had arrived in the country some twenty years earlier when a lad of seventeen. For eleven years he worked at a variety of jobs

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1 Attorney-General's File, 7/809, 19 January 1932.
2 Metal Manufactures' Employment Cards (company file, Port Kembla).
4 Ibid.
5 Interviews with Mr D. Timmins, Mr A. Speed, Mr L. Boardman. See also Workers' Weekly, 7 September 1932.
6 Ibid.
7 DMB, 17-18 February 1930.
in Queensland and then moved to Sydney where he was employed for several years as a wharf-labourer, shifting to Wollongong in 1928.\(^1\) From an early date Briemle was regarded as a militant socialist. In 1915 he had been arrested and convicted for breaching the War Precautions Act and sentenced to three months imprisonment.\(^2\) Once in Wollongong, he established himself as an active committee member of the Waterside Workers' Union and as a communist organiser, being regarded by local industrialists as 'a menace'.\(^3\) Another outsider to play a significant part in unemployed politics was L. (Len) Tracey\(^4\) who arrived in Wollongong from Western Australia in 1929. Unlike Briemle he was not a member of the Communist Party when he arrived. Born at Stoke-on-Trent in 1899 he had, like his father before him, worked in the local potteries. At sixteen he joined the British army and served in France. After migrating to Australia following demobilisation, he worked initially on the Western Australian goldfields before moving to Wollongong in the hope of finding work at the steelworks. By 1931 he was district secretary of the Unemployed Workers' Movement and an active member of the Communist Party.

The first notable venture of this radical group was in March when they led an unauthorised demonstration of two hundred members of the Port Kembla Unemployed Workers' Movement along Crown Street. A manifesto published in the Illawarra Mercury before the event defined its object as being to attract attention to the 'dire straits and needs of our position...to prevent us from becoming a permanent army of down and outs and regular stiffs'. The banners held aloft by the protestors proclaimed their growing frustration: they

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\(^1\) Attorney-General's File, 7/809, 19 January 1932.

\(^2\) Ibid.

\(^3\) Ibid. See also South Coast Branch Waterside Workers' Federation Minute Book, 6 January 1932.

\(^4\) L. Tracey (or Tracy) was the depression pseudonym used by Mr L. Boardman.
urged the repudiation of trade union officials, the abolition of 'coorie rations' and opposition to fascist and social fascist organisations.¹

The growing influence of radicals was demonstrated in the formation of a Workers' Defence Corps in April 1931. In accordance with Communist Party tactics the formal initiative for it came not directly from the communists but from an established and more respectable labour organisation, in this case the Trades and Labor Council.² In late March a combined meeting of trade union officials declared that the objectives of the Defence Corps were to protect the interests of the working class against fascism and social fascism, and the establishment of a workers' government.³ From the outset, however, the Workers' Defence Corps was under the leadership of the communists who, by moving that all officers of the Defence Corps were to be elected from among the unemployed, effectively debarred union officials from control of the movement.⁴ A provisional committee of seven was formed and charged with forming further units in local centres.⁵

A common tactic employed by this group was to take-over established relief organisations. In July 1930 the Bulli Shire Council established a Shire Relief Committee comprised of delegates from miners' lodges and local organisations and businesses.⁶ Sub-committees were established in each of the mining communities within the shire and it was the capture of these bodies which the Workers' Defence Corps concentrated upon. In most cases the take-over went largely unnoticed, though on occasions the aggressive stance adopted by Hitchen and Shayler alienated many men who were not yet committed to militancy.

¹Illawarra Mercury, 6 March 1931.
²Ibid., 1 April 1931; Sydney Morning Herald, 14 April 1931.
³Ibid.; Illawarra Mercury, 1 April 1931.
⁴Ibid.
⁵Ibid., 15 April 1931; Sydney Morning Herald, 14 April 1931.
⁶Illawarra Mercury, 7 July 1930; Bulli Shire Minute Books, 7 July 1930.
The first open opposition to communist influence occurred in July 1930 at Woonona where E.L. Holmes, a local cordial manufacturer and later Nationalist candidate for Bulli, led a splinter group to form the Bulli-Woonona Unemployed Union. Holmes had earlier been elected to the Woonona sub-branch of the Shire Relief Committee. At a meeting of the Unemployed Workers' Movement called to formulate a joint relief programme, he had criticised the movement's political activities as 'likely to create open conflict with constitutional authority'. The Unemployed Workers' Movement responded to this criticism of its methods by expelling Holmes from its ranks despite the fact that he had never been a member. Holmes later declared it was this attempt to denigrate his efforts that awakened him to an imminent communist takeover and strengthened his belief that the organisation of the unemployed ought not to be left to fanatics such as Shayler and Hitchen.

There is some evidence of both a reluctance by the unemployed to accept the communist argument that they should reject government charity, and of active resistance to early political demonstrations. In July, Bulli unemployed ignored Hitchen's persistent advice that they should refuse to fill out a questionnaire as a preliminary to receiving the dole. In September the Unemployed Workers' Movement publicly acknowledged that they were losing control of street meetings. Workers, described by Hitchen as the 'slum element', were said to be forcing speakers off their platforms and throwing missiles. This action, Hitchen thought, was 'most useful to the ruling class in so far as it has given them an opportunity for stopping all street meetings'.

1 Illawarra Mercury, 13 July 1931.
2 Ibid., 6 March 1931.
3 Ibid.
4 Sydney Morning Herald, 26 July 1930.
5 Illawarra Mercury, 5 September 1930.
During the summer of 1931, however, the mood of the unemployed became more bitter. As the problem of unemployment increased the state government determined to economise in the distribution of food rations and complaints of harsh and arbitrary treatment multiplied. Families were affected by the tightening of regulations. Children under twelve months of age were no longer considered members of a household for relief purposes unless a doctor certified additional nourishment was required. 1 Moreover, the migratory unemployed were threatened with eviction from their camps. Both the Northern and Central Illawarra Municipalities were critical of the government’s failure to provide promised financial assistance and resolved respectively to disband and to restrict further entry to their 'unemployed' camps. 2

Destitution was probably greatest among the single unemployed. The Bavin government in July stopped the issue of food relief so as to compel them to 'travel' in search of work in order to be eligible to draw rations. The immediate result, however, was merely to increase the burden of the already struggling local relief committees. The Port Kembla soup kitchen, after issuing £0,000 rations of soup and bread and four hundred issues of bread and stew, found its funds exhausted and considered closure. 3 In a public demonstration of their growing restlessness a meeting of 'two hundred ill-clad desperate unemployed men', as Robert Allen described them in his Labor Daily column, resolved to meet weekly at Port Kembla and demanded full maintenance. 4 For the first time the normal double rations at Christmas were not forthcoming. 5

1 Labor Daily, 16 September 1930.
2 Northern Illawarra Municipality Minute Books, 3 February 1931; Central Illawarra Municipality Minute Books, 20 January 1931; Sydney Morning Herald, 12 April 1931; Labor Daily, 2 April 1931.
3 Labor Daily, 23 October 1930.
4 Ibid., 6 November 1930.
5 Illawarra Mercury, 3 January 1931.
Those who were dissatisfied with the curtailment of relief now found they could make common cause with the militants of the Unemployed Workers' Movement. Up to this time applications for the dole were heard weekly by local relief committees. On the coalfields these committees normally included trade union officials and administered relief regulations with as much leniency as possible. It was partly to curb such benevolence and partly to create more uniformity that, the state government moved, in April 1931, to replace local committees with relief officers employed by the Department of Labour and Industry. More critical perhaps was the proposal to introduce the police into the relief depot organisation. Each applicant was to be first identified by a local police officer and then questioned by the six relief officers. Reaction to the changes was uniformly hostile. After queuing in a dole line for eight hours it became clear, to Corrimal unemployed, that 'a great number of previously successful applicants were being refused the dole' by the new relief officers. A subsequent meeting of the unemployed vowed that unless their local relief committee was immediately admitted they would refuse rations and declare the issue black.¹

In the event, the relief committee refused to surrender their authority and were removed from the relief depot by the police. A meeting of the unemployed outside the depot applauded the committee's stand, endorsed the earlier decision to declare the dole issue 'black' and marched to the Wollongong Labour Bureau in protest.² Subsequently unemployed meetings at Balgownie and Bulli adopted similar resolutions and a mass meeting of 2,000 unemployed at Slacky Flat, Bulli, condemned the new procedures and proclaimed their intention to continue boycotting dole issues until local relief committees were reinstated.³ The immediate indications were hopeful. Shortly after the boycott was declared the Woonona

¹Ibid., 30 April 1931.
²Ibid.
³Ibid.
relief committee was allowed to distribute dole tickets. Moreover, E. Bellemore, manager of the State Labour Exchange, seemed at least prepared to compromise. On successive days, he offered to accept two and later three members of local relief committees as colleagues in the distribution of rations. Bellemore's statements, however, avoided any mention of police participation. More than any other single factor, it was the presence of the latter which presaged future conflict. By the end of April the unemployed were, in the words of Robert Allen speaking more accurately than perhaps even he hoped, 'red hot with indignation'.\footnote{Labor Daily, 30 April 1931.} To many of his opponents the warning of impending upheaval looked suspiciously like a threat.

In early May, Bellemore returned to Wollongong in an attempt to win local support for the new system of dole distribution. On this occasion he explained his proposal more fully. He advocated the establishment of a new relief committee made up of a representative of the Department of Labour and Industry, a policeman and a local citizen.\footnote{Illawarra Mercury, 1 May 1931.} The unemployed were apparently in no mood for compromise, as there was no response to his initiative. The main objection was still to police participation.\footnote{Ibid., 8 May 1931.} It was still believed that they would take advantage of their position to victimise those whom they regarded as troublemakers. Only the presence of local representatives would offer an adequate check. The procedures of the new officials seemed to lend point to the view that the old system was better. In Wollongong women and children queuing for food relief were left standing in the rain for the best part of the day. Applicants' credentials were carefully scrutinised and they were then asked to sign a statutory declaration as to their
At Mt Kembla, in the absence of the local relief committee, youths whose fathers had work were refused food relief. The injustice was more keenly felt because many miners were drawing their first pay in several months and some for much longer periods. Negotiations reached a stalemate when a lively meeting of Wollongong unemployed rejected a Department of Labour proposition that they should work for the dole and demanded the living wage.  

On Friday, 8 May, the Wollongong district committee of the Unemployed Workers' Movement voted unanimously to protest outside the Bulli ration depot the following Monday and to encourage greater resistance of the new relief system. Hours before the depot opened a crowd, variously estimated at between two hundred and five hundred, had assembled on a vacant block directly opposite. Chaired by H. (Harry) Blacklock, a local communist, the customary dole-day meeting of the Bulli branch of the Unemployed Workers' Movement began at 9 a.m., an hour before the depot was due to open. Following the pattern of earlier protests the demonstrators 'almost unanimously' declared the rations black until full power was returned to the local committees and for as long as the police continued to scrutinise ration claims. A new and, given the heated tone of the meeting, explosive element was added when it was resolved to operate an eight-man picket on the steps of the depot.

Hardly had the picketers taken their stand than an unemployed Coalcliff miner, J. (John) Anderson, attempted to break through them and collect his rations. As Anderson was being jostled by the pickets and denied entry to the depot two policemen, apparently on duty at the relief centre, intervened and attempted to arrest two of the picketers. At this point a group of thirty or more men surged forward and enveloped both police and picketers. For about five or ten minutes 'waddies flew and batons crashed down on heads, faces

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1 Ibid., 1 May 1931.
2 Ibid.
3 Labor Daily, 9 May 1931.
and hands,¹ until about eight demonstrators and two policemen remained struggling on a small patch of grass in front of the dole depot. But for a horse and sulky, which separated the combatants from the remainder of the unemployed, the police might have been seriously injured. In the event, however, both horse and sulky were knocked to the ground by the pressure of the surging crowd, but at the same time they checked the rush of reinforcements. There was enough time for the police to draw their guns, and for a further constable to emerge from the depot. As Allen, the unemployed organiser and Labor Daily reporter, aptly, though somewhat disingenuously, summed up this situation: 'three guns constituted a menace too great for weaponless men'.² 

Not all of the unemployed were without 'weapons'. Many carried lengths of piping covered with rubber hosing while still others had arrived at Bulli in the morning armed with batons. Allen's description of the state of the three policemen is adequate testimony of the vicious nature of the attack:

Sergeant Standing [Standen] came out of the station bleeding and bedraggled with his gun in a bleeding left hand, and his baton in his right, making way he struck a man with the baton. The man hit back and it looked as if for a minute the previous scene would be repeated. The sergeant fumbled with an injured hand, presumably to operate his gun, and failing changed the weapon over to the right hand, and telling the man he would get him later, returned to the station.³ 

Later:

...With his face and hands covered with blood which dropped down his tunic to the ground, the sergeant, with his gun in one hand and his baton in the other held off the closely following crowd, while Constable Perry, in worse condition with the help of Constable Smith, dragged Hitchen along the street assisting the while to hold at bay the crowd of five hundred men.⁴

¹Ibid., 12 May 1931.  
²Ibid.  
³Ibid.  
⁴Ibid.
With the retreat of the police, the unemployed rapidly dispersed. Car loads of policemen were rushed to Bulli but it was all over. Only Hitchen, who had been dragged protesting along the road, was arrested during the riot. For the remainder of the day the police scoured the district interrogating all known members of the Unemployed Workers' Movement. Transients in unemployed camps, both official and illegal, received special attention and many were told to move on or see their camps destroyed.\(^1\) By evening ten men had been arrested and held in Wollongong and Bulli lock-ups. Despite later allegations of police brutality, Hitchen was the only arrested demonstrator to display visible injuries and these he alleged were sustained not during the riot but later at the police station. Two of the three policemen, however, were treated at Bulli hospital and the third, Constable Perry, was admitted in a serious condition. His injuries, two 'large' wounds to the front of his head and smaller abrasions near the right temple were consistent, according to later medical testimony, with blows from pieces of piping and a series of deliberate kicks.\(^2\)

It is difficult to know just what those who witnessed the affray were thinking. Probably sympathy for the unemployed and respect for law and order more or less cancelled each other out. There is some evidence that several onlookers went to the assistance of the police, either by drawing police attention to known communists such as Hitchen, or by positive intervention against the assailants.\(^3\) Most, however, stood by passively as the police were attacked. The Bulli Unemployed Union had some ground for asserting that violence was the work of a minority, and that the majority would not be loath to dissociate themselves from the incident. The union carried parochialism to an almost ludicrous degree. They professed to regard as 'interlopers from outlying

\(^1\)Ibid., 14 May 1931.
\(^2\)South Coast Times, 16 October 1931.
\(^3\)Labor Daily, 12 May 1931.
districts' men who lived in neighbouring communities scarcely two miles distant. Further, cloaking its minority position, the union attempted to pose as the spokesman for the Bulli-Woonona Relief Committee and declared:

That we, the Bulli-Woonona Relief Committee, consisting of the Bulli-Woonona Relief Committee, Woonona Relief Committee, and the Bulli-Woonona Unemployed Union, view with indignation the riotous behaviour shown here to-day, by an organized body of the Unemployed Workers' Movement, members who do not live here and congratulates [sic] Sergeant Standen and Constables Perry and Smith on their magnificent courage in facing and fighting off a band of ruffians estimated at over 100. Furthermore, this committee is determined to stand for the preservation of law and order and offers all the assistance in its power to assist the police in the execution of their duty.

The suggestion that the Unemployed Workers' Movement had set out to provoke a battle with the police was unfounded. It is true that, apart from Hitchen and Culbertson, the men later arrested were not entitled to relief from the depot and had walked to Bulli to help persuade the Bulli unemployed to refuse any dole issue until the police were removed. It was also true that a few like Hitchen, who later claimed that as a communist it was 'his duty' to serve the interests of the working class, came armed with bicycle chains, batons and pieces of piping. Violence was, nevertheless, not premeditated but rather a spontaneous response in a confused situation to the arrest and manhandling of the pickets.

Regarded on one side as brutal assault and on the other as justifiable defence, the violence at Bulli polarised local opinion. The Unemployed Workers' Movement continued to reject the new dole regulations and Scarborough, Clifton, Coledale, Wombarra and Port Kembla branches declared the issue black. Scuffles broke out between the unemployed and the police at

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1 Ibid., 13 May 1931.
2 Ibid.
3 Illawarra Mercury, 15 May 1931.
4 South Coast Times, 16 October 1931.
5 Illawarra Mercury, 15 May 1931.
port Kembla and at Wollongong, where food relief and the new procedure was accepted, but they were quickly quelled. Precipitate police action in both places provoked retaliation. Port Kembla police refused to allow an unnamed speaker to address the customary dole day unemployed meeting. Batons were drawn and the crowd was dispersed. Some measure of police uneasiness is evident from charges brought against unemployed men involved in the Wollongong and Port Kembla skirmishes. Two men were arrested for having insufficient lawful means of support and several others for obstructing footpath traffic.

The divisions within unemployed ranks widened after the riot. The Wollongong Unemployed Workers' Union declared support for the forces of law and order and styled themselves 'honest citizens' in contrast to the Unemployed Workers' Movement. They announced that they were prepared to work for the dole and claimed a monopoly of the right to canvass public financial support for the workless. Despite its considered public statement, the bid by the Unemployed Workers' Union for control of the jobless proved abortive. Only in Wollongong where it claimed 710 members was the union numerically strong. Elsewhere, apart from the Bulli-Woonona splinter group, the Unemployed Workers' Union won few converts.

While the riot further divided local society and failed to achieve its immediate objective - the withdrawal of police from relief depots - the attack on the police worked some good for the unemployed. A committee representing Coledale, Scarborough and Clifton branches of the Unemployed Workers' Movement was able to extract from Bellemore on the day following the riot a promise to restore the local committees.

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1 Ibid.
2 Ibid., 15 May, 5 June 1931.
3 Ibid.
4 Ibid., 22 May 1931.
5 Ibid.
6 Ibid., 8 May 1931.
At Thirroul, Bellemore authorised the local committee to sit, though at first he insisted on police supervision. He later, however, promised a joint delegation from the Miners' Federation and Unemployed Workers' Movement that the police would be removed. Despite Bellemore's apparent commitment the police remained. They did so, however, with a feeling of unease. Dole distribution at Mt Kembla was delayed while local policemen telephoned for reinforcements. Anxious to avoid provoking further violence the police adopted a supervisory role, leaving identification to the relief officers.

With the more equable stance adopted by the police, militant opposition to the new dole procedure lost much of its support. The Unemployed Workers' Movement once more turned its attention to the provision of the day to day needs of the jobless. Anticipating a Wollongong winter without adequate shelter, the district Council of the Unemployed Workers' Movement asked the Government to erect huts to replace the tents and humpies at Fairy Meadow and Port Kembla. Militancy was now confined to words: the district council wrote firm lette:rs, issued stern warnings and adopted emphatic resolutions. They accomplished little, however, because governments both state and federal, preferred to deal with the more orthodox, if less representative local government relief agencies. When, in July 1931, the Federal Government authorised the distribution of coal to the Northern Illawarra destitute, whether aged or unemployed, the selection of the deserving was delegated by the municipality to the Women's Relief Guild. This body with or without justification was

1 Labor Daily, 13 May 1931.
2 Ibid., 1 June 1931.
3 Illawarra Mercury, 15 May 1931.
4 Interviews with Mr L. Boardman, Mr D. Timmins, Mr W.J. Anderson, Mr T. Royal, and Mr H. Blacklock.
5 Illawarra Mercury, 19 June 1931.
6 Ibid., 3 July 1931.
roundly denounced by the Unemployed Workers' Movement as an 'anti-working class unemployed organization'.¹

In September yet a further check on the validity of dole applications was introduced. Claimants were asked to complete a new application form which sought even more detailed information and required the endorsement of an alderman, minister of religion, sergeant of police, town clerk or postmaster as witness. Moreover, a simultaneous tightening of dole regulations threatened to depress even further the living standards of the workless. In particular the stipulation that men must be out of work for fourteen days before receiving relief created consternation. Rigidly enforced, these regulations would debar miners working as little as two days a fortnight. The Miners' Federation and the Unemployed Workers' Movement were united in their condemnation of the proposed alterations. They jointly advised the jobless to refuse to sign the new application form and called for mass resistance.²

Response to this call for action was strangely muted. At Port Kembla, members of the Unemployed Workers' Movement publicly burnt the application forms and were denied food orders.³ On the coalfield miners refused to sign the questionnaire.⁴ Yet despite this initial stand opposition faded, and within days normal relief distribution continued. A belated attempt by the Bulli Unemployed Workers' Movement to mount a demonstration against the dole regulations won insufficient support.⁵

A combined conference of mine lodges and the Unemployed Workers' Movement with a good sense of timing declared 30 September, the day set down for the trial of the Bulli

¹Ibid., 10 July 1931.
²Sydney Morning Herald, 7 September 1931.
³Ibid., 10 September 1931.
⁴Ibid., 11 September 1931.
⁵Ibid., 17 September 1931.
rioters, as a one-day protest strike. A manifesto issued by the Unemployed Workers' Movement concentrated more on the plight of the Bulli rioters than on specific opposition to the dole regulations and declared:

On this day 12 members of our class are being 'framed' in the capitalistic court at Bulli for fighting the workers' battle at that place on 11 May this year. Protest and demand the release of these working class fighters.¹

Individual lodges, however, were divided in their reaction to the strike decision. Some, including the Mt Kembla lodge, rejected the proposal and returned to work. The planned demonstration likewise evoked little support. There was no procession, although a meeting on a vacant block of land in Crown Street was addressed by Sydney communist leaders, J. (Jack) Kavanagh and H. (Herbert) Moxon.² This abortive demonstration marks the end of any serious attempt by the Unemployed Workers' Movement to encourage opposition to the new regulations.

It is difficult to discover convincing reasons for this lack of support. Labor Daily reports of the Unemployed Workers' Movement activities ceased abruptly with the dismissal of the South Coast reporter, Robert Allen, allegedly for his radical working class activities and continued denunciation of the Lang Labor government. Probably the memory of Bulli dissuaded many from any further involvement. It is possible also that as the political aims of protest became more extreme orthodox Labor men had second thoughts.

The failure of the unemployed leaders to mount a sustained protest again. changes in the dole regulations and the trial of the twelve Bulli rioters mark a stage in the development of street demonstrations. During the court proceedings the actions of the police at the time of the riot and at later protest meetings were greatly criticised by the unemployed and union leaders alike. Certainly the police as in any situation of crisis or excitement tended to pick out

¹ Labor Daily, 7 September 1931.
² Sydney Morning Herald, 10 October 1931.
familiar faces. Of the evidence produced against the Bulli-rioters, only that against Hitchin was better than circumstantial. The worst example was the sentencing of Robert Culbertson who was convicted of assaulting Sergeant Standen. Culbertson was said to have hurled a piece of road metal as Standen was retreating towards the police station. He was also charged with hitting out at the policeman with an iron bar when challenged. These actions occurred in the middle of a swirling group of rioters, whose obvious anger caused Standen to withdraw once more. Culbertson was not identified until late that night by powder marks common amongst miners, which Standen claimed to have noted during the scuffle. On this evidence alone Culbertson was sentenced to three months' imprisonment.

It was a communist tactic to use the law court itself as a further arena in which to hurl defiances. During the trial of the Bulli rioters C.A. Morgan, the solicitor appearing for the defendants, withdrew from the case as a protest against the alleged partiality of the presiding magistrate, A.C. Chapman who had presided over preliminary hearings in a magisterial capacity, and had expressed opinions on some of the charges. Chapman countered by arguing that since no plea was taken in the initial hearing, he had not presided in a judicial capacity. Whatever the legal niceties, the appellants were united in their refusal to enter a plea until Chapman was replaced. From the dock, Briemle claimed that Chapman in previous cases involving street protestors had shown himself 'biased to [sic] working class principles'.

Following day, continuing his deliberate attack on the judge's authority, a meeting hastily convened by the Unemployed Workers' Movement moved,

That this meeting expresses its appreciation of the stand taken by the workers tried in connection with the Bulli affair in objecting to Mr Chapman

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1 South Coast Times, 11 October 1931. See also Appendix I: The Bulli Riot, 11 May 1931, pp. 365-77.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.
S.M. sitting on their cases because of his blatant class bias displayed on numerous occasions against members of the working class and the vindictive sentences he has inflicted. We support them in their request for trial by another magistrate and ask that in the interests of justice their request be complied with. Similar protests followed from the Illawarra Trades and Labor Council and from numerous trade unions.

Common to all the protests was the assertion that the power of the court was being used to crush all opposition - militant or mildly critical - to constituted authority. Other alleged strongholds of conservatism came under the same attack and demands for Chapman's dismissal were accompanied by attacks on the Wollongong Council in general and Howarth in particular. Continuing to act on behalf of the now defunct Illawarra Trades and Labor Council, Steve Best described the Wollongong Council as 'composed entirely of anti-Labor elements' responsible for gaoling workers who defended 'our unalienable right of free speech'. In a similar vein, the Corrimal branch of the Unemployed Workers' Movement commended the 'free speech fighters' for refusing to 'bow to the dictates of the spineless capitalist apologists on the Wollongong Council'. Yet despite mounting criticism from the local labour movement Chapman did not waver in his belief that the legal issue involved was not the deprivation of the democratic right of free speech, but whether or not the Wollongong Municipality had power to control its streets. The demonstrators freely acknowledged that local authorities were invested with such authority. What they refused to accept however, was that this power was being exercised impartially.

1 Attorney-General's File, 7/809, Wollongong Unemployed Workers' Movement to W.J. McKell, 19 October 1931.
2 Ibid., S. Best to W.J. McKell, 27 October 1931.
3 Ibid., Corrimal Unemployed Workers' Movement to W.J. McKell, 14 January 1932.
4 Illawarra Mercury, 2 December 1931.
To a growing number of the jobless it now seemed that entrenched conservatism, local government authorities, the courts, indeed the whole power of the state was endeavouring to crush the Unemployed Workers' Movement by ascribing to it the actions and plans of its militant minority. Men who had previously been quiescent now came out in their hundreds to defend it. Conservative over-reaction succeeded in doing what the communists were unable to do, that is, politicise the poverty stricken and convert distress into class conflict.

The establishment in August 1931 of New Guard localities in Wollongong and Bulli further accentuated this growing class antagonism. A para-military, quasi-fascist body, the New Guard aimed to counter the twin evils of Langism and Communism. E. (Eric) Campbell, the movement's leader, expounded a simplistic political creed to his Wollongong supporters: 'A body of aliens have set themselves up as Communists. These imported scoundrels, these Russian killers who have been imported into Sydney and even Wollongong must be crushed.'

In the economic field the New Guard advanced old fashioned laissez-faire views, which had experienced a certain amount of revival in the face of Lang's essays in state regulation. There was nothing new in the New Guard's repetition of the old cliché - more business in government and less government in business - and nothing more hackneyed than the adoption of the right-wing desire to put an end to state paternalism. According to this view, social services killed the incentive to individual effort and this in turn weakened the character of the people. Australia's problem was primarily moral and political. The depression had merely worsened a situation already undermined by lack of moral courage and national spirit. A dominance of sectional selfishness had brought politics into disrepute and caused the parliamentary machine to break down. Moral uplift and

\[\text{1} \text{Labor Daily, 19 November 1931.}\]
sound principles of government freed from party machinations were the sine qua non of economic restoration.

The men most receptive to Campbell's appeal neither heard, nor wanted to hear, an involved exposition. Rather they responded to a simple call for patriotism, loyalty, honesty, courage, freedom and sacrifice. In Wollongong, as elsewhere in Australia, ex-officers of the AIF found again a chance to exercise their military talents for command and organisation. The Wollongong locality was organised from the Returned Servicemen's League headquarters in Church Street. In December 1931 the police estimated that at least twenty-five per cent of all guardsmen were men with military experience, and Campbell has described most of his recruits as ex-soldiers. By the 1930s many of these officers were well established as professional or businessmen. Typical of the former category were Dr N.E. Kirkwood, and J.P. Caddy, general manager at Metal Manufactures plant in Port Kembla. Kirkwood had come to Port Kembla shortly after the outbreak of war in August 1914 as a newly qualified, twenty-four year old medical practitioner. Almost twelve months later he volunteered for military service in the medical corps. Returning to the district at the war's end he set up practice in Wollongong. He was grandson of Russell Barton (1830-1916) a pastoralist, mine owner and politician. Though not politically active until the early depression years, he shared his forbear's conservatism. During the decade before the crash, he busied himself with his medicine and in community affairs. At different times he was president of the Port Kembla Returned Servicemen's League and the Wollongong Rotary Club and built up a considerable reputation as a man 'of good standing and common sense'. His fear that the communists, whom he thought held sway in the coalmining communities, planned to 'raid Wollongong', prompted him to support the formation of a Wollongong N Guard locality. Following preliminary meetings at Port Kembla and Wollongong,

1NSW PP, 1931, p.1057.
2E. Campbell, The Rallying Point (Melbourne, 1965), p.64.
attended in the main by Rotarians and Returned Servicemen, a joint meeting elected Kirkwood foundation president. He now describes himself as a compromise selection - 'less of a wild man than Mayor Howarth or Alderman Dr H.H. Lee' who had sought the post. Certainly the later actions of all three men confirm this view.¹

Born at Waverly, New South Wales, in 1882, Caddy graduated Bachelor of Engineering from Sydney University in 1903 and after metallurgical work in Queensland, New South Wales and West Australia, enlisted in 1915. By the end of the war he held the rank of Major in the Field Engineers. He served in France and fired the mines on Russels Top after the last party evacuated Gallipoli, an act for which he was later awarded the Military Cross. In 1920 he was appointed Assistant General Manager at the Port Kembla copper manufacturing plant and five years later became General Manager. At the onset of the depression he was Vice-President of the Wollongong Returned Servicemen's League, and President of the South Coast and Tablelands District Boy Scouts. Together with Kirkwood he was an active member of the All Australia League and a foundation member of the Wollongong branch of the United Australia Party, formed in 1931, and subsequently chairman of that party's Port Kembla branch. To his employees Caddy projected a militaristic, brusque 'apparently despotic manner'.²

Kirkwood and Caddy typify the solid business and professional men who approved of and helped organise the New

¹The biographical material in this paragraph was obtained from H.H. Lee, 'A Medical History of the Wollongong District', Medical Journal of Australia, Vol.2, no.10, September 1955, pp.353-6, an interview with Dr N.E. Kirkwood, 1 December 1972. See the Australian Dictionary of Biography, Vol.4, 1851-1890, pp.115-6, for an outline of the career of Russell Barton by N.B. Nairn.

²This biographical sketch is based on Metal Manufactures Directors' Reports, 29 September 1925; Metal Manufactures Gazette, April-May 1943, p.3; M.H. Ellis, Metal Manufactures Limited, A Golden Jubilee History, 1916-1966 (Sydney, 1966), pp.22-3.
Guard locality. It is more difficult, however, to establish the nature of the New Guard's following.\textsuperscript{1} It appears likely that guardsmen were drawn in significant numbers from among the salaried officials and staff employees at the Port Kembla industrial plants, some of whom thought they were 'expected' by their employers to support the New Guard.\textsuperscript{2} Support came also from men in business on their own account - e.g. \textit{all} shopkeepers who felt themselves to be crushed bet en organised labour on one side and big business on the other - or small farmers fearful of their property rights. Members of the Unemployed Workers' Movement now, as then, claim that there were no 'unemployed or basic workers' in the New Guard.\textsuperscript{3} While this was almost certainly true of the coalfields where, according to police estimates, there were twenty-five guardsmen, it was not so in Wollongong. The police considered that the numerical strength of the New Guard in Wollongong was about 1,500. This is probably an excessive figure, but it indicates a belief that there was widespread local support for the movement.

\textsuperscript{1}It is not yet possible to obtain access to material held by the New South Wales State Archives (Colonial Secretary's File, 5424-9.1). The Premier's Department supplied information relating to the New Guard localities in Wollongong. It appears that in 1931 each police district in New South Wales was asked to report on New Guard activities in their area. The information so gathered formed the basis of a police report to the Chief Secretary. See NSW PP, 1931, p.1057. The extent of the district reports varies. Some contain complete membership lists, while others merely name local officials and estimate membership. The Wollongong report was of the latter type. I was shown the return but asked not to cite names which appeared in it. Dr N.E. Kirkwood, however, declared in a letter to the author (18 October 1972), and subsequently in a recorded interview (1 December 1972), that he had been elected 'leader' of the Wollongong locality. The Bulli locality was led by a retired British soldier who had held the rank of major. Presumably, when the relevant files are released it will be possible, with the aid of electoral rolls, to establish more precisely the occupations of New Guard followers for at least some parts of New South Wales. The paragraph that follows is based in the main, upon material gathered in interviews.

\textsuperscript{2}Interview with Mr W. Mintorn, 2 August 1971.

\textsuperscript{3}Recorded interview with Mr L. Boardman. See Appendix I: The Bulli Riot, 11 May 1931, pp.365-77.
The Unemployed Workers' Movement was more concerned, however, at the support given the New Guard by public officials. It seemed to receive the approval of the Wollongong Municipal Council. Both the Mayor, W.L. Howarth, and Alderman Dr H.H. Lee publicly proclaimed their support for it. As well as at least two of its members aligning themselves with a group intent upon establishing itself as an extra-legal police force, there developed or equally important, seemed to develop, a close liaison between the council and the police. Summonses to unemployed protesters were served by the police acting on the advice of the council health inspector, H.E. Gale, whose responsibility it was to initiate court proceedings against illegal street meetings. Gale, therefore, was a familiar figure at unemployed demonstrations, at which he was seen frequently in conversation with the police. So close was his identification with the police that one metropolitan newspaper commonly referred to him as Inspector Gale.

Following Campbell's November address, described in the *Labor Daily* as 'comprised of fifty per cent indecent and filthy sex jokes and stories, thirty per cent inane platitudes and twenty per cent inaccuracies', the New Guard made a concerted effort to harry known communists. Alleging that he was attacked by thirty guardsmen, Ernest Briemle sought sanctuary in the Wollongong lock-up. The first general clash between the New Guard and those they defined as communists occurred during the federal election campaign of December 1931 when the communist candidate for King, L.L. (Lawrence) Sharkey was one of the speakers at an outdoor meeting in the streets

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1 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 7 September, 8 October 1931.

2 *Labor Daily*, 19 November 1931. The meeting also drew a protest from Anglican churchman, Reverend A. Walker, who thought Campbell's speech 'against the basis of the Bible, the ethics of Christianity and the principles of a gentleman'. *Illawarra Mercury*, 20 November 1931.

of Wollongong. The meeting was heckled by New Guard men ostentatiously asserting their patriotism in the singing of 'Rule Britannia', 'Advance Australia Fair' and 'God Save the King'. A motor cycle noisily cut a swathe through the listeners and the New Guard then swarmed forward and knocked the speaker, Robert Sandwith, an unemployed ironworker known to the police as a distributor of the Workers' Weekly, to the ground. In the course of the general melee which followed two of the participants were knocked unconscious and eight arrests were made.

It is clear that a determined and planned effort was made by the New Guard to disrupt the meeting. It is equally clear that they were prepared, if necessary, to use physical force to do so. The earlier attack on Briemle and rumours that a further attack was to be made, induced communist supporters to arm themselves. Members of the Workers' Defence Corp walked from Helensburgh and Port Kembla and women were asked to wear 'high heeled shoes with an iron tip or to carry a long knitting needle or hat pins'. When the dust settled, batons, truncheons and a long bowie knife were confiscated by the police.

Despite a police admission during the hearing that the New Guard launched an armed attack on communist speakers, no attempt was made to prevent the disruption of the meeting, nor were any New Guardsmen arrested during the affray. A policeman, in giving evidence, was asked by one of the

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1 For Sharkey's role in the Australian Communist Party see Alastair Davidson, The Communist Party of Australia: A Short History (California, 1969), passim. See also Sharkey's own history of the party: The Australian Communist Party: Outline History (Sydney, 1944).

2 Illawarra Mercury, 11 December 1931; Sydney Morning Herald, 10 December 1931; Daily Telegraph, 10 December 1931.

3 Illawarra Mercury, 11 December 1931.


5 Illawarra Mercury, 11 December 1931.

6 Ibid., 22, 29 January 1932.
defendants why no attempt was made to arrest Dr Lee, who had exchanged punches with several communists and was alleged to have wrenched on his hands under gloves. The policeman replied that he did not see Lee challenging anyone to a fight.\(^1\)

The presumption in favour of self-defence, it seemed to those arrested, operated only one way.

During the trial the police prosecutor, Sergeant Pye, was at pains to emphasise the communist associations and anti-religious stand of the defendants. He cross examined Charles Kelso, a diminutive twenty-one year old Scot charged with possession of a loaded sling with intent to do grievous bodily harm. Pye asked him, 'Do you believe in the Almighty? - I beg your pardon you refused to be sworn'.\(^2\) Earlier in the hearing, a police assertion that all Wollongong workers, who came before the court, had received a fair trial was greeted by uproar in the courtroom. Kelso, who was sitting at the front of the court awaiting his case was alleged to have emitted a groan. He was at once charged, convicted and fined for contempt of court.\(^3\) In giving evidence to support the charge against Kelso, the police prosecutor told him: 'This has been your demeanour ever since you have been in Wollongong. Once your pretty face is seen it is never forgotten.'\(^4\) Moreover, in summing up, the Stipendiary Magistrate, A.E. Hardwick, introduced a novel, if somewhat incoherent, commentary on the principles of free speech.

This is not a country of barbarians. At all political meetings if the audience indicate to the speaker that they do not want to hear him he simply stops. There is no justification for a person to carry a murderous weapon like this [bowie knife]. If there is to be disregard of constitutional authority we will get nowhere.\(^5\)

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\(^1\)Ibid.

\(^2\)Ibid., 29 January 1932.

\(^3\)Ibid.

\(^4\)Ibid.

\(^5\)Ibid.
Both sides claimed victory. The conservative press asserted that New Guardsmen had hounded the communists, the Workers' Weekly that the guardsmen were routed.\(^1\) Wherever victory in fact lay, at a subsequent meeting outside the Wollongong stadium the Unemployed Workers' Movement was prepared.

When this meeting was on the speakers were placed against the wall of the stadium...and round the speaker formed the Workers' Defence Corps. Outside them was the ordinary people, and again... a ring of WDC, again the people and WDC outside them. These men outside were facing away from the meeting. The police were there and the police were told that provided there was no trouble with the New Guard then there would be no trouble with us. Anyhow, the New Guard were amongst the people inside the two rings and when Bateman was talking the New Guard started to throw eggs and tomatoes. The police were issued with instructions that if they didn't stop "hem, we would stop them. The result was that the sergeant, when one man threw another tomato, was told that if he didn't walk in we walk'd in. We walked in and grabbed this man and hit him as he was going to throw another one. The New Guard up in Globe Lane would not come out....The meeting finished and all of our people, thousands of them, walked up and down Crown Street calling for the New Guard to come out and singing the 'International' and the 'Red Flag'.\(^2\)

It is not claimed here that this is a totally objective report of the scene in Crown Street, Wollongong - though there is corroborative contemporary evidence to suggest that in its essentials it is. It does, however, demonstrate the determination and vigilance which had been aroused among workers by the menace of the New Guard. Nor is the later contention that the New Guard made little headway in the coalfield community, simply the product of forty years' hindsight.\(^3\) Anonymity was impossible for active guardsmen on the coalfields. Openly taunted many soon abandoned any

\(^1\)Sydney Morning Herald, 9 December 1931; Daily Telegraph, 10 December 1931; Workers' Weekly, 10 December 1931.

\(^2\)Recorded interview with Mr L. Boardman, Mr D. Timmins, Mr H. Blacklock, 26 February 1972. The full text appears in Appendix I: The Bulli Riot, 11 May 1931, pp.305-77.

\(^3\)Ibid.
public connection with the New Guard. Intimidation often went as far as interference with property: sand and sugar were added to petrol tanks, car tyres slashed. Known or merely suspected guardsmen were the victims of systematic 'snow dropping' campaigns. Certainly after mid-1934, the Wollongong New Guard did very little. Scuffles at communist street meetings continued but were less frequent. The rendezvous and drill over the mountain at Madden's Plain of a Sunday afternoon continued, however, to fire the more adventurous with the notion that they might be wanted to do something stirring. But there was nothing to approach the violence of the clashes in December 1931.

Despite repeated threats of physical violence from New Guard hotheads on only one further occasion did this seem likely. It was the custom for south coast miners to celebrate May Day with a procession and sports day on the first Monday in May. In 1932, however, May Day fell on a Sunday. The decision of the miners' May Day Committee to hold its celebrations on the Sunday met with vocal criticism from churchmen, leader writers and local government spokesmen. S.R. Musgrave, Anglican editor of the Illawarra Mercury, who had previously adopted a position of strict neutrality in local politics and industrial disputes allowed himself to take sides against the May Day Committee on this issue. He denounced the committee's decision as

...a direct challenge to the Churches of all Denominations and [it] must be taken as the culmination of much talk on the part of a certain section of the community, as to the need for fighting religion no matter what denominations. 2

At the Anzac Day address delivered on the Sunday previous to the projected May Day celebrations an attack was made on 'those in our midst who [are] now trying to destroy all the things that the Diggers felt were worth fighting for'. 3 Permission to hold the procession was refused by the

1 The stealing of washing from clotheslines.
2 Illawarra Mercury, 29 April 1932.
3 Ibid.
Moreover, opposition came from unexpected quarters. The Miners' Delegate Board refused to give its usual donation to the organisers. The reason for its decision is not clear though Musgrave in his editorial had, in the view of Pat McHenry, attempted to enshrine Lowden 'as a paragon of Christian virtues, pure unsullied and serene in his struggle to uphold religion against the supposed attacks of the militant infidels!' It is possible that the Delegate Board was acting in accordance with a general directive from the central council of the Miners' Federation to curb communist influence at the district level. But whatever prompted the denial of financial support, McHenry felt that the obvious lack of solidarity might embolden the New Guard and encourage physical disruption of the celebrations.

In the event the procession was 'orderly and no police action was found necessary,' though the Wollongong Council prosecuted nineteen marchers for taking part in an unlawful procession. Moreover, during the period between the procession and the subsequent prosecutions the Lang government was replaced by the Stevens-Bruxner coalition. The new Attorney-General and Minister of Justice, Sir Daniel Levy was somewhat less sympathetic to appeals by workers for a remission of fines. In the case of the May Day marchers he accepted the conclusion of J.B. Scobie, the Stipendiary Magistrate, that the procession was held in defiance of the Council and that disregard of the ordinance could only lead to further prosecutions.

The May Day procession marks a turning point in the history of public protest by the Unemployed Workers' Movement. In the first instance the changed attitude of the Attorney-General's department offered protestors the choice between

1 Wollongong Municipality Minute Books, 21 April 1932.

2 Illawarra Mercury, 6 May 1932.

3 Attorney-General's File, 7/809, J.B. Scobie, S.M. to Under-Secretary of Justice, 10 June 1932.

4 Ibid., 14 June 1932.
longer terms of imprisonment or heavier fines. Further, the dismissal of Lang seemed to cut the ground from under the feet of those workers whose demands for free speech were an extension of their support for Lang. Conversely, with the removal of the New South Wales Labor premier and return of the Stevens government there was no further function for the New Guard and its organisation withered away. Perhaps the same calculations operated within the Wollongong Council Chambers for, from this point, permission to speak in the streets was given more freely and fewer prosecutions were initiated.

Throughout the political struggles of 1931–2 the self-help programme launched earlier by the Unemployed Workers' Movement continued to function. By examining the composition of the self-help bodies and of the groups involved in political protest, it is possible to construct a general picture of the Wollongong Unemployed Workers' Movement. Most members were recent British migrants who brought with them a tougher, more radical view of politics. This is not surprising, and for a coalmining district the less so, since the policy of 'first on, last off' which operated in Australian coalmines meant that newcomers would be disproportionately represented among the unemployed. It is possible also to generalise about the pre-depression experience of the more active members. Typically, they were volunteers in the British army during the first world war who returned to Britain to find it not a land fit for heroes to live in but a land of growing unemployment. They migrated to Australia in the early 1920s and arrived in Wollongong at a time when work in the coalmines was slowing down. In general, they had little union experience in Britain. Some were members of the British Labour Party, but few, because of the date of their departure, were communists before reaching Australia. When the depression struck, the 'typical' Wollongong activist was a married man of between thirty and
The reasons these men now give for having joined the Unemployed Workers' Movement are revealing, not only of their own motives but also of the movement's nature. All hoped that in Australia they would leave behind them the grosser evils of industrialism and capitalism. Others were attracted by the humanitarianism and sincerity of radicals with whom they came into contact. To some, involvement in the co-operative ventures gave some meaning to a life of enforced idleness. Another important characteristic was the strong independence with which most were imbued and which is exemplified by the very act of migration. The Unemployed Workers' Movement was flexible enough in its organisation to give these men a chance to assert themselves. It is instructive to note that many of these men who became members of the Communist Party during the rather fluid circumstances of the depression years \(^1\) - the party in the mid and late 1930s when more formal ideological demands were made of them. Their political thinking had been influenced by simple socialist tracts rather than by the writings of Marx or Lenin. \(^2\)

A further characteristic of the movement became clearer during its decline. To many within its ranks the Unemployed Workers' Movement was simply the trade union of the jobless. The movement's leaders encouraged this view. In the early months of the depression they had rejected all suggestions that relief wages should be reduced to allow greater numbers to be employed. In 1931 they refused to accept a government proposal that the unemployed should work for the dole, rather

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\(^1\) If Bolton's assertion that the typical Western Australian activist was a shifting individual is true, then the Wollongong experience is vastly different. See G.C. Bolton, 'Unemployment and Politics in Western Australia', in R. Cooksey (ed.), *The Great Depression* (Labour History, no.17, 1970), p.96.

\(^2\) The most widely read of these socialist tracts were: Robert Tressell's *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* and the works of Jack London and Upton Sinclair.
than accept a handout.¹ In rejecting the 'Moss Vale Scheme',² as this proposition was commonly labelled, the movement's spokesmen frequently cited the experience of New Zealand's unemployed.³ The level of unemployment in New Zealand at its peak was about fifteen per cent of the working population or roughly half the Australian figure. The New Zealand Prime Minister, G.W. Forbes, formulated the principle of 'no pay without work', for he believed the British dole system to be demoralising. Instead the unemployed were huddled into crude makeshift camps remote from the towns and worked in primitive fashion on road construction and land clearance projects. New Zealand experience therefore strengthened left-wing suspicion that 'work for the dole' would be 'a prelude to Fascism'.⁴ The acceptance of such a scheme would open the way for the undermining of trade union rates and the destruction of unionism. By economic conscription men would be driven into relief camps and compelled to submit to the 'dictatorship of camp officials'.⁵

Self-help could also take the form of embryonic trade unionism, as in the summer of 1932-3 when attempts were made to organise seasonal blackberry pickers. In better times the picking and sale of blackberries was a family venture which had the added virtue of financial gain. To the jobless of the depression blackberrying represented real income. Branches of the Unemployed Workers' Movement wanted local unions to restrain their men who were in work from competing with the jobless for the fruit.⁶ In January 1933, Mt Kembla pickers formed an association to agitate for increased and uniform picking rates and appointed delegates

¹Illawarra Mercury, 1 May 1931.
²The Moss Vale Shire Council was the first New South Wales local body to adopt the scheme.
³Red Leader, 6 November 1931.
⁴Ibid.
⁵Ibid.
⁶DMB, 16 February 1931; Mt Keira Lodge Minute Book, 17 January 1933.
to encourage pickers in other localities to affiliate. The jam manufacturers and their agents simply ignored the association's demands.

The seasonal nature of blackberrying militated against any successful unionism among pickers. The same problems were not found among relief workers. In April 1932 the Commonwealth Government, in an attempt to co-ordinate existing relief schemes, moved to establish state employment councils which would recommend works projects for the relief of unemployment. It was not until May 1933, that money from the Commonwealth Relief Fund began to be expended locally. By the end of 1933, however, almost two thousand men were participating in the Emergency Relief Scheme. Work was allocated according to need. Single men received six hours a fortnight, while at the other end of the scale a married man with five or six children was allotted twenty-six hours a fortnight. Since trade union rates applied to emergency relief work the scheme was in principle acceptable to the labour movement though the traditional uneasiness about broken-time remained.

In its day to day operations, however, the scheme aroused much criticism. Men out of work for long periods had neither the necessary clothing nor footwear and working conditions were uniformly bad. First-aid facilities were not provided and men worked without any protection from the weather. There was moreover, no guarantee of a start on wet days and men often trudged fruitless miles to their starting points. Furthermore, while trade union rates applied, margins for skill were not acknowledged. Advocates of unionism among relief workers therefore found a ready audience. By the early months of 1934 Relief Workers' Associations, with a claimed

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1 Red Leader, 1 February 1933.


3 Bulli Shire Minute Books, 9 December 1933; Central Illawarra Municipality Minute Books, 11 October 1933; Wollongong Municipality Minute Books, 5 February 1933; Northern Illawarra Municipality Minute Books, 29 June 1933.
membership of two thousand members, existed in each of the four local government areas. The associations had three stated objectives: a one hundred per cent increase in work hours, better working conditions and the recognition of margins for skill. There were serious obstacles in the way of achieving these aims. Stop work meetings were prohibited. Since the work-force changed constantly it was difficult for organisers to remain in close contact with their members. However, opposition from local governments struggling to maintain relief projects without recourse to their general funds was to prove the most difficult problem.

The speed with which the unemployed leader became relief association official foreshadows later developments within the Wollongong labour movement and emphasises the importance of the Unemployed Workers' Movement. If ideological commitment to the Communist Party strengthened the resolve of many of these leaders, the Unemployed Workers' Movement provided them with experience in leadership. This experience, together with the reputation for placing the general welfare of the jobless ahead of personal considerations, was to prove a valuable asset after 1933 as trade unions attempted to regain lost ground.

It is more difficult to assess the political implications of the unemployed protest movement as men joined the demonstrations for different reasons. Some protested out of frustration. At most no more than a handful advocated resistance of authority. Its leaders preached relief rather than revolution. It was precisely because the protest movement was defensive in nature that it attracted such widespread support not only from the unemployed but also from trade unionists. The protesters believed, and with some justification, that they were the victims of repressive local governments. The demonstrations and the responses of local authorities to them accentuated class antagonisms. Nevertheless, these clashes were essentially parochial ones. They were concerned to question the actions of local bodies and to obtain some say in matters affecting the everyday life of the jobless. The political thinking of the majority of
the unemployed could be summed up in one word - Langism. Support for the New South Wales premier in a sense however, as we shall discover, truncated grass roots political protest.
CHAPTER FOUR

POLITICS AND DEPRESSION: 1930-4

The two issues which preoccupied Wollongong workers in the early months of depression, as they did those elsewhere in Australia, were growing unemployment and deteriorating working conditions. Both were closely related and were reflected in the political demands of the Wollongong labour movement. The 1929 federal elections were fought mainly on the arbitration proposals of the Bruce-Page government which, in labour eyes, were aimed at emasculating if not destroying the whole arbitration system. In New South Wales the Nationalist-Country Party of Bavin and Buttenshaw seemed intent upon balancing its budgets and cutting costs by a series of 'economy' measures the impact of which fell disproportionately upon wage earners. In April 1930 the coalition reduced public service salaries by eight and one-third per cent and repealed Lang's Act of 1925 which had established the forty-four hour working week in New South Wales. When this was followed by the abolition of child endowment for the first child, some Wollongong trade union officials denounced government policy in class-war terms. If the attempt of northern proprietors to reduce wages was an example of 'an attack of the master class on the conditions of the working class', then, F. (Fred) Lowden declared, the Bavin administration by its handling of the northern lock-out and by its later actions had clearly taken 'sides with the master class in this onslaught'.

A few union officials, such as J. (Jim) Ward, president of the Illawarra Trades and Labor Council and secretary of the Port Kembla branch of the FIA, saw the whole situation in terms of the communist doctrine of the crisis of capitalism. In Ward's view, unemployment was inevitable while capitalism remained in any country of the world, and it behoved the

1 Illawarra Mercury, 2 May 1930.
workers to demonstrate against local governments, against parliaments and against 'other institutions of the bosses'.¹ He did not advocate open revolt, although he suggested that should the working class rise, 'no power on earth would stop them'.² Some leading miners often added a conspiracy thesis to the communist view that unemployment and economic depression were inherent to capitalism. Acting in concert the employers had, in Lowden's view, deliberately manufactured a slump in order to implement a policy of lower wages, longer working hours and harsher working conditions. The employers' task in the Wollongong district was made easier, or so Lowden thought, by the absence of strong unionism at Port Kembla. If workers opposed the employers industrially and defeated their political representatives a rapid and complete economic recovery would follow.³

While the conspiracy thesis coloured most attempts by workers to explain the coming of the depression, they nevertheless adopted an undoctinaire position on the relief of unemployment calling for the traditional 'colonial' expedients of borrowing and increased expenditure on public works. Borrowing, they argued, would wipe out any budgetary deficits so created. These opinions were articles of faith for Labor supporters in Wollongong as elsewhere. A large measure of social legislation and satisfactory working conditions could be preserved only by high protection and heavy public borrowing. It could have been predicted that a federal Labor government would face much the same problem as those confronting Bavin and that J.H. Scullin and his colleagues would soon be at odds with their supporters in trying to reconcile traditional assumptions with current economic realities.

When Scullin became Prime Minister in October 1929, much was expected of him. Soon after he came into office, it was apparent that he would not honour an election promise to open

¹Ibid., 15 April 1930.
²Ibid.
³Ibid.
New South Wales northern coalfields on the miners' terms. His failure to do so left him open to accusations of cowardice and treachery and led southern miners to demand the disaffiliation of their union from the ALP.¹ Relations between the Federal Government and the Labor Party in New South Wales worsened when Scullin invited Sir Otto Niemeyer, an official of the Bank of England, to visit Australia and report on its financial affairs. Niemeyer's report was as unpalatable as his prescriptions were ruthlessly deflationary. He maintained that the Australian policy of tariff protection and heavy external borrowing was an attempt to support a standard of living that was higher than was justified by economic conditions abroad and production at home.

The drift of federal Labor policy towards the retrenchment and budget-balancing which was advised by Niemeyer opened up gaps in the party's ranks. J.T. Lang, the New South Wales Labor leader, building on the conspiracy thesis already widely held by Australian workers, denounced federal inaction. In the early months of 1930 Lang was at pains to emphasise the differences between the Labor Party in New South Wales and the Scullin government. London financial interests, declared Lang, were using economic pressure to reduce the Australian standard of living to the level of agrarian Argentine and industrial Germany.² By 'truckling to English overlords'³ Scullin had placed Australia further in the grip of the 'money power'.⁴ Lang was now emboldened to present himself as the saviour of the people and by August 1930 he had developed a substantial following in the electorate. Moreover, he attracted the support of a

¹DMB, 15 March 1930. For an explanation of Scullin's failure to carry out this election promise initially made by E.G. Theodore his deputy leader, see J.R. Robertson, 'Scullin as Prime Minister: Seven Critical Decisions', in Robert Cooksey (ed.), The Great Depression in Australia, pp.29-30.

²Sydney Morning Herald, 19 September 1930.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid.
group of New South Wales federal Labor members including the member for Werriwa, H.P. Lazzarini. The predicament of the federal government can, to some extent, be gauged from the advice Lazzarini gave Wollongong's unemployed coalminers:

We are in the grip of the money power and unemployment will get worse unless we are prepared to lock horns with the money power and fight them [sic] to the death. If all Labour has to offer is the dole then to hell with Labour and get something else.¹

This was scarcely an ill-considered outburst for, little more than twelve months later he was to help bring down the Scullin government.

Against this background of growing unemployment, economic debate and heightened political awareness New South Wales prepared to go to the polls in October 1930. The selection of the abrasive Wollongong mayor, W.L. Howarth, as the Nationalist candidate for the Illawarra seat heralded a bitter local contest.² In elaborating his credentials to the Nationalist Party selection panel Howarth declared he was determined to prevent disorder in the streets and to 'stop the extreme elements and their actions definitely'.³ Labor spokesmen reacted sharply to Howarth's espousal of a law and order platform: they claimed that the presence of four Wollongong aldermen on the panel which selected Howarth was conclusive proof that the town was controlled by a 'Nationalist clique'.⁴ The subsequent use of the Wollongong council chambers as the Nationalist Party campaign headquarters emphasised, in the eyes of workers, the partisan character of the municipal council.

Howarth presented himself as a local advocate whose policy it was to insulate the district from the worst effects

¹Illawarra Mercury, 1 August 1930.
²For the 1930 state elections the Wollongong electorate with slight boundary changes was renamed Illawarra. The other local electorate, previously known as Illawarra, was renamed Bulli.
³Illawarra Mercury, 26 September 1930.
⁴Attorney-General's File, 7/809 passim. The four aldermen were: Dr H.H. Lee, T. Kiernan, J.B. Wells, W.A. Lang.
of the depression. He rejected Lang's proposals as 'vile and extravagant' and professed support for a series of solutions, known as the Melbourne Agreement, passed at a premiers' conference in August 1930. In the terms of this agreement state governments undertook to balance their budgets and to avoid unproductive loan expenditure. Although Lang had been careful not to advocate the repudiation of New South Wales debts, Howarth assured Wollongong electors that a large section of Labor supporters did, and that should Lang be successful he would prove incapable of resisting the repudiationists within his party. He warned voters that the choice was between 'honour and dishonour'. The existence of a national crisis demanded that 'rigid party allegiance' and 'personal preferences for individual candidates' be abandoned. He presented the Premiers' Plan as a 'National Policy for Australia without catch cries or personal appeal, prejudice, bias or creeds'. By opposing this non-party programme, he said, Lang and the Labor Party of New South Wales, were hindering the only effective policy open to responsible men. To some extent Howarth's appeal above party, in the name of a proclaimed national interest, was dictated by political expediency for, despite boundary changes, the newspapers predicted a substantial Labor victory in both Wollongong electorates. It was of greater significance that Howarth's programme reflected two ideas which dominated

1 *Illawarra Mercury*, 10 October 1930.

2 A repudiation resolution had been included in a five-point plan to combat the depression issued by the Political and Industrial Committee of the New South Wales Labor Party in August 1930. The Central Executive of the party, however, defeated the adoption of the committee's recommendations. See *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 and 29 August 1930.

3 *Illawarra Mercury*, 26 September 1930.

4 Ibid., 16 October 1930.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 See, for example, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 October 1930; *Illawarra Mercury*, 10 October 1930.
conservative thinking on the causes and possible solution of the depression. The first was an unqualified acceptance of the wages-fund theory, namely, that a fixed proportion of national income was available for wages. The second was the rejection of any artificial attempt to prevent the free working of 'natural' economic laws. Such measures were likely to result either in the collapse of free enterprise under the weight of excessive wages, or in spiralling inflation.

The argument that the issue of the 1930 election transcended both state and party boundaries was pushed a stage further by the Nationalist candidate for Bulli, E.L. Holmes. According to Holmes, a Woonona cordial manufacturer and forthright opponent of the Unemployed Workers' Movement,¹ there would be little economic progress in Australia until the party system was abandoned. Criticism of party politics was common during the depression. Those who questioned the value of the party system normally based their arguments on the belief that political parties represented the interests of particular sections of classes of society rather than those of the whole community.² Holmes was reflecting these views when he offered the electors his 'Bulli-Policy'; an eight-point programme which would rescue Australia from economic disaster. The first three planks restated the orthodox formula for coping with the depression—a determination to balance budgets by a general belt-tightening. This, however, was the extent of his commitment to the Nationalist platform. Subsequent sections of his policy questioned the validity of representative government based upon the party system supported by universal franchise. What Australia needed, according to Holmes, was a great universal party which would 'lift politics out of the gutter' and effect a political regeneration.³ If elected he promised

¹See Chapter Three, pp.121-6.

²For an account of these developments see Peter Loveday, 'Anti-Political Thought' in Robert Cooksey (ed.), The Great Depression in Australia, pp.121-35.

³Illawarra Mercury, 26 September 1930.
to plant the seed of such a party. It would have one ideal 'the betterment of Australia no matter what the cost'.\(^1\) In this 'letter' Australia conflict between worker and employer was to be forestalled by the creation of an all-powerful judicial body to be known as the Supreme Council of the National Economy, which would determine wage structures within individual industries.\(^2\)

The derisory spirit in which Holmes's proposals were received in Wollongong was exemplified by a Woonona wit who asked whether Holmes planned to 'put false teeth in the mouth of the Yarra'.\(^3\) At a Corrimal meeting he was counted out.

To restore some semblance of order the chairman organised a ten-minute debate on 'Bavinism' between Holmes and S. (Steve) Best, the secretary of the Illawarra Trades and Labor Council.\(^4\)

A small but growing number of coalminers was also beginning to question acceptance of parliamentary methods as a means of furthering the cause of labour. For some of them it was but a short step from the belief that the depression was a capitalist plot to advocating the overthrow of capitalism and the establishment of a workers' government 'similar to that enjoyed by the workers in Soviet Russia'.\(^5\)

The nomination of two coalminers, E.H. Bostick and F. Nixon, as Communist Party candidates was not viewed as inconsistent

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\(^1\)Ibid.

\(^2\)Ibid. The 'Bulli-Scheme', as announced to the electors was as follows: (1) To balance our budgets; (2) To live within our income; (3) To borrow no further money until the finances have been put in order; (4) To pledge himself to no party; (5) To force down the cost of living by law should wages be forced down in order to decrease the cost of production, increase employment and improve the conditions of the people; (6) To endeavour to lift politics from the gutter; (7) To endeavour to form a Supreme Council of the National Economy, consisting of employers and employees, to govern the industrial wealth of Australia, and be One Industrial Authority; (8) To see that everybody gets a fair deal. See also Illawarra Mercury, 10 October 1930.

\(^3\)Ibid.

\(^4\)Labor Daily, 24 October 1930.

\(^5\)Illawarra Mercury, 26 September 1930.
with this aim. The election campaign provided a forum for demonstrating 'the fallacy of depending upon parliamentary action as a solution to the present parlous position of the working class'.

Neither Bavin nor Lang, if elected, would be able to alleviate the position. In prosperous times the Labor Party might pose as a party of reform, but when capitalism, because of the inevitable and increasing struggle for markets, could no longer tolerate such concessions, it used the apparatus of the capitalist state to lower the 'miserable existence of the working class'. Such was the face of 'social fascism'. Lang, despite his promises would, like Scullin, be a 'parliamentary manager of the capitalist state'.

Labor's platform was a fairly orthodox one. Internal borrowing would finance a programme of expansion and reform. In a joint manifesto W.A. Davies and A.A. Lysaght, Labor's candidates for the Illawarra and Bulli seats respectively, stressed the restoration of child endowment, widows' pensions and an increase in workers' compensation. In speaking to dairy farmers in the northern part of his electorate, Davies made much of the rural distrust of city financiers and promised to stabilise rural markets. Both men constantly reiterated the conspiracy explanation of the depression. There had, claimed Davies, been no change in the real wealth of the country, but only in the means of its distribution; 'the liquid cup had been locked up [sic] by London banks to bring down the standard of living by a reduction of wages and an increase in working hours'. Both Labor candidates reminded the coalminers that Bavin's complicity with the

1 Ibid.
2 Ibid., 10 October 1930.
3 Ibid.
5 Illawarra Mercury, 24 October 1930.
6 Ibid.
capitalists had been most clearly demonstrated during the northern lockout. 1 Davies warned constituents that the 'kingdom of international shylocks planned to reduce the miners to coolies and the dairy farmers to serfs'. 2

Despite changed political boundaries and fewer voters in each electorate, Illawarra and Bulli voters returned 3 Davies and Lysaght with substantially increased majorities. In Bulli the Labor majority grew from 1,523 in 1927 to 7,093, while in Illawarra Davies increased his majority from 3,600 to 4,405. 3 Nationalist candidates failed to win a single sub-division. Holmes polled more than Lysaght in only one rural polling booth, while Howarth finished ahead of Davies in four booths in the southern dairying sector. The Communist vote was negligible, amounting to two per cent of the votes cast in each electorate, though appreciably higher in the purely coalmining communities of the Bulli electorate. In rejecting the economic orthodoxy offered by Bavin, Wollongong electors made the same judgement as the state electorate at large which swept Lang into office with fifty-five of the ninety seats.

Opposition to the 'money power' was a traditional populist appeal with little danger to the candidate since it was beyond disproof. 4 Any subsequent failure to crush its tyranny served only to emphasise the diabolical strength of its empire. But it: Lang himself had no clear plan to offer, there was no lack of confident advice as to the path he should

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1 Ibid.
2 Ibid.
3 The Bulli figures were: A.A. Lysaght (Labor) 9,170; E.L. Holmes (Nationalist) 2,077; E.H. Bostick (Communist) 331. In Wollongong the figures were: W.A. Davies (Labor) 8,944; W.L. Howarth (Nationalist) 4,405; F. Nixon (Communist) 231.
4 Reform of banking has always been part of labour platforms in Australia. Especially was this so during the depression of the 1890s. See Robin Gollan, The Commonwealth Bank of Australia (Canberra, 1968), pp. 42-58.
follow. Even before Labor's victory in October 1930, Wollongong trade union officials advocated a return to what they claimed to be the Labor party's ultimate objective - the socialisation of industry.¹ Among coalminers the socialisation objective was more firmly and sincerely held than by the ALP membership more generally. In the first place, nationalisation was held to be the only full and sound method of transforming the structure and efficiency of the coal industry. It offered a means of reducing the industry's costs without necessarily resorting to alterations in wages and hours. This was especially true of coal-exporting regions such as the southern Welling district. For this reason miners supported a motion, put forward at the New South Wales Labor Party 1930 Metropolitan Conference, 'to set up a committee to devise ways and means to propagate the first and principal platform of the party - the socialisation of Industry'.² Following the conference, a network of socialisation propaganda units, or 'socialisation units' as they were later called, was established throughout New South Wales by a committee set up at the conference 'to propagate the objective of the Labor Party, i.e. the Socialisation of Industry'.³

In Wollongong the initiative in forming socialisation units came from the industrial and not the political wing of the labour movement. In August 1930 Steve Best, secretary of the Illawarra Trades and Labor Council, summoned a conference of trade unionists to put forward a remedy for the ills which confront us, the socialisation of the means of production, distribution and exchange.⁴ Supported by most

¹Illawarra Mercury, 23 August 1930.
²Labor Daily, 10 February 1930. The motion was proposed by A.W. Thompson organiser of the Milk Employees' Union and president of the Enfield branch of the party. See Robert Cooksey, Lang and Socialism (Canberra, 1971), pp.6-11.
³Robert Cooksey, Lang and Socialism, pp.8-9.
⁴Illawarra Mercury, 23 August 1930; Socialisation Call, 4 Apr. '1 1931.
local unions, the conference set out to establish what immediate and practical steps would best prepare the way for the eventual achievement of the socialisation objective. Initially, it concentrated upon finding ways to promote the socialisation of the means of distribution. The chain of eight co-operative stores throughout the district provided a starting point for this programme. By the winter of 1930, the co-operative stores were helping to shield their customers from the depression by allowing extended credit and by adopting a liberal attitude when distributing dole rations.

If unionists were to trade only with co-operative stores, then it would be possible, delegates argued, by extending the role of the societies, for workers 'to promote prosperity rather than allow the capitalists to rationalise and produce scarcity'. It was proposed that the co-operative movement should not limit its activities to the retail trade, but rather that it should absorb some of the economy-regulating functions which were the prerogatives of capitalist institutions. Taking Lang's stand against the 'excessive demands made by English and Australian capitalist banks', as their example, the delegates voted to seek legislation to enable co-operative societies to act as bankers and insurers. Ultimately it was hoped that the growth of the co-operative movement would make private enterprise in the field redundant.

Despite the stress upon evolutionary rather than revolutionary change there was an underlying confidence that socialism could be achieved 'in our time' and only by the Labor Party. Some delegates at the August conference had claimed that they could discern among the workers a general

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1 Unions and labour organisations represented at the conference were Southern District Miners, South Bulli Lodge, Mt Pleasant Lodge, Mt Kembla Lodge, PEFDA, FIF, United Labourers, WWF, ARU, Woonona Co-operative Society. Ibid.


3 Illawarra Mercury, 15 November 1930.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.
acceptance of the need for 'evolutionary change for the socialisation of industry'.\(^1\) In January 1931, an Illawarra Socialisation Committee was appointed to stimulate such thinking.\(^2\) The committee organised educational classes in economics and current history. In the period of heightened political awareness immediately preceding and following the election of Lang, the socialisation units made considerable headway especially among the coalminers. Later events were to bring the units into open conflict with Lang, but for the moment they were able to be contained as a ginger group within the New South Wales Labor Party.\(^3\)

As well as stimulating increased support for the socialisation units, Lang's victory at the polls, in October, produced a growth in political involvement at the branch level. New branches were formed and lapsed branches revived. It is difficult now to gauge the thinking of the men who took part in this grass-roots political revival. Oral evidence, however, makes some speculation possible. Men active in the Unemployed Workers' Movement thought, however erroneously, that by forming an ALP branch they might open up another source of assistance for the unemployed.\(^4\) For others joining the ALP was a reflection of genuine enthusiasm for Lang. Yet the zeal which Lang was able to inspire in so many of his followers was balanced by a belief that industrial action offered greater scope than support for any politician.

Apart from a handful of communists, few Wollongong workers consistently attempted to analyse Australian politics in class terms, or indeed, in terms of a theory of any kind.

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\(^1\)Ibid.

\(^2\)The executive members were: J. Ward (president), A. Southern (Woonona Co-operative Society), A.E. Hart (educational committee of the Woonona Co-operative Society), T. Silcocks. Members of the social committee appointed at the same time were: A. Powell, J. Wright, J. Ward, S. Best, E. Hayes, J. Todhunter, E. Sparkes, J. Martin. See Labor Daily, 29 January 1931.

\(^3\)The socialisation units were strongest in the Sydney branches. See Socialisation Call, 4 April 1931.

\(^4\)Interviews with Mr J. McLeod, 7 June 1972 and Mr D. Timmins, 8 June 1972.
Before 1931 was out, however, there were clear signs of a sharpening of political ideas. Neither the high degree of unemployment nor the division between Lang and federal Labor satisfactorily explains why many Wollongong workers moved to a more radical position. One cause may be sought in the dialectics of local politics. The district's conservative leaders reacted with almost irrational horror to Lang's wilder outbursts, though their fears were understandably heightened by the strain of running businesses in depression. Some of these men were moved to throw out provocative, not to say insulting, challenges to what they regarded as 'Langism' in the district. As early as 1928 Wollongong businessmen challenged the rights of workingmen, either individually or collectively, to seek positions of civic responsibility.¹ They justified this stand by pointing to the administrative inexperience and financial naivety of their opponents. In part these criticisms reflected a long-standing attempt to keep politics out of local government, yet underlying them was the belief, sometimes openly expressed, that only those with a 'financial stake' in the district should vote in local elections.² Interpreted widely such a rubric might embrace all ratepayers, but it was clear from later utterances that a more restrictive meaning was implied. Investors and businessmen, who had by careful husbandry guided the district through the ups and downs of the 1920s, were not anxious to allow others a hand in their economic future. A group of these civic dignitaries, led by W.L. Howarth, the mayor of Wollongong, W.A. Lang and T. Kiernan, both building contractors, and Dr H.H. Lee formed the nucleus of Wollongong conservatism.

In early 1931 Kiernan and W.A. Lang were prime movers in the formation of a Wollongong branch of the All for Australia League, an association of conservative businessmen bound together by the desire to form 'a united movement' to meet, what they saw as 'a social crisis'. The stated objectives of the League were: to develop a strong body of public opinion

¹Illawarra Mercury, 14 November 1928.
²Ibid.
to force governments in the direction of sane and honourable finance, and to demonstrate 'that Australian public opinion is pledged irrevocably to a policy of national integrity'.

Its appeal to economic patriotism, summed up in the catch cry 'buy Australian', was calculated to gain support not only from traders and professional men, but from all ranks of society. Staff and perhaps a handful of other workers at the steelworks responded by joining the organisation in large numbers apparently convinced by claims of the Hoskins brothers that the league sought to promote national interests and to thwart sectional ambitions. Union leaders, however, were quick to assert that local employers were simply using the rhetoric of economic nationalism to revive declining trade and divert attention from an impending attack on working conditions. Speaking as president of the Illawarra Trades and Labor Council and as secretary of the Port Kembla branch of the FTA, J. Ward put the unions' case against the League:

If the aims and objects of the AFAL really stood [for] All for Australia, the workers would be quite in accord with it, as we are prepared to adopt any proposals that mean breaking the imperialisic stranglehold of the money-lords that now have us in their grip but the AFAL does not stand for such ideals; we know it to be an organization operating to keep the capitalists on the backs of the workers and to stabilise their inhumane system of exploitation, with its attendant starvation and misery for the mass of the workers. The function of the AFAL organization is to put into effect the proposals of the Hoskin[s] brothers for the general smashing of wages, increased hours of labour, the organization of Fascist forces to overthrow constitutional government and the setting up of a dictatorship of the employing class.

When C.S. Hoskins, general manager at AIS, suggested that the steelworks could win long-term Japanese contracts if workers accepted a ten per cent wage cut, sceptical unionists were justified in their belief that the economic patriotism of the employers was a propaganda stunt to creat the impression

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1 Ibid., 27 March 1931. The following were elected to the Wollongong committee: W. Millword, W. Mintorn, P. Kennedy, T. Kiernan, W. Macken, J. Halliday, S. Cook, R.J. Craig, Dr N.E. Kirkwood, A.R. Bevan.

2 Labor Daily, 28 March 1931.

3 Ibid.
that union intransigence was preventing a return to full employment.¹

The economic ideas summarised in the slogan 'Buy Australian made', were harmless enough. Ward, however, pointed to the League's extreme right-wing leadership. In a series of explanatory articles in the Illawarra Mercury early in 1930, the League elaborated its political thinking. Starting from the premise that Australian society was in grave danger of destruction,² it exhorted the 'great moderate section of the thinking community to organize themselves into a powerful body' which would 'ignore the present warring parties' and prove Australia 'worthy of the wonderful race of which we are destined yet to be the most important branch'.³ A less convincing aspect of this British-Australian fervour was the favour bestowed upon Mussolini. Ward's use of the term 'fascist'⁴ was not without justification: the League professed faith in the individual, and looked for the emergence of a strong leader. It was not without reason that unionists claimed to detect the cloven hoof in this spurious Australian patriotism.

Wollongong labour leaders also followed European affairs more closely during the early 1930s, but they drew a different set of conclusions from the All For Australia League. The coalminers were forthright in their denunciation of fascism. A stop-work meeting of Corrimal miners, in January 1930, refused to work with Marco Panozza, an Italian and self-confessed member of the fascisti. His continued presence on the coalfields was, miners said, a menace to unionism.⁵ Lowden denounced fascist organisations as a 'boss class movement to smash the workers'.⁶ The rank and file accepted

¹Ibid.; also Sydney Morning Herald, 1 June 1931.
²Illawarra Mercury, 10 January 1930.
³Ibid.
⁴See p.168.
⁵Illawarra Mercury, 17 January 1930.
⁶Ibid.
this verdict and after listening to a lecture on fascism 'as
the last pup of capitalism',\(^1\) voted with two exceptions to
give Panozza twenty-four hours to get out of Corrimal.
Italians remaining on the coalfield felt it expedient to
renounce fascism publicly and extol the benefits of unionism.
Opposition to fascism was not confined to the coalminers.
Other local unions unanimously condemned it. The FIA
executive refused to accept the employment of Panozza at the
Port Kembla steelworks and the Illawarra Trades and Labor
Council supported its decision.\(^2\) At the same time the
normally quiescent FEDFA voted to boycott all businesses in
Wollongong who joined the All for Australia League or who
declared support for fascist policies.\(^3\)

The issue which most clearly divided local society was
the clash between the unemployed and the Wollongong Council.\(^4\)
The street protests were not wholly, or even mainly, the work
of the communists. Official support, both moral and physical,
for the demonstrations came from southern district miners,
the FIA and the Illawarra Trades and Labor Council. The less
militant unions such as the FEDFA and the ARU added their
voices to the protest. ALP branches were less vociferous in
their support, but many individual members took part in
demonstrations as a chance to show their support for Lang.
It is difficult however, to do more than guess at the
political attitudes of the majority of the demonstrators.
The formal protests by the unemployed and their supporters to
the New South Wales Labor Government on behalf of convicted
demonstrators say much of the political composition and
alleged bias of the local authorities, something about the
protestors' expectations of the Labor government, but little
else.

\(^1\) Ibid.
\(^2\) Ibid., 17 April 1930.
\(^3\) Ibid.
\(^4\) See Chapter Three, pp.114-49.
The federal election campaign of December 1931 took place against a background of bitter street fighting in Wollongong between New Guardsmen and communists\(^1\) and the growing realisation among New South Wales militants that Lang was powerless to help them. As Lang's support appeared to increase fears rose correspondingly among conservatives. Most of them continued to regard Langism and communism as synonymous. At a Premiers' Conference, in February 1931, Lang had rejected both the orthodox plan for deflation and E.G. Theodore's plan for releasing credit. He offered instead a set of proposals known as the Lang plan. Interest payments on overseas debts were to be suspended, internal interest rates reduced to three per cent and the gold standard was to give way to a currency based on the 'goods standard'.\(^2\) When the premiers rejected his plan Lang announced that he would make it the policy of New South Wales.

If these actions alarmed conservatives, they also had a disruptive effect upon the labour movement. Labor's victory in New South Wales had been achieved by making clear the distinction between Lang's policy and that of the vacillating Scullin government. The Lang Plan was in part a deliberate attempt to keep this distinction alive. In terms of the party constitution it was a declaration of independence in matters of federal policy by the New South Wales branch. The challenge to the federal executive became clearer early in 1931 during a by-election for the federal seat of East Sydney. The state executive selected E.J. Ward, a young Lang supporter, as the endorsed Labor candidate and instructed him to fight the election on the Lang Plan. The ALP federal executive countered by ordering Ward to campaign on recognised federal policy. When Ward won the seat on the state programme the federal parliamentary Labor party refused to accept him as a member. In protest four MHR's, including H.P. Lazzarini, the member for Werriwa, withdrew and with Ward formed a separate parliamentary party under the leadership of J.A. Beasley.\(^3\) In March, a special federal conference of the

\(^1\)See Chapter Three, pp.143-9.


\(^3\)The remaining two members were J.C. Eldridge and R. James.
ALP formally expelled the New South Wales branch and for the rest of the 1930s two Labor parties fought each other at the polls. After the Scullin government accepted the Premiers' Plan, in June, the Lang Labor Party came increasingly to regard it as a matter of indifference whether the government or the UAP should be in power since the economic policy being followed was in substance that of the anti-Labor parties. In November they voted with the Opposition to defeat the Government.¹

The fall of the Scullin government caught non-Labor parties in a state of disunity and disorganisation. It was only after the announcement of the election that Wollongong branches of the All For Australia League and the Nationalist Party joined ranks as the UAP. Both... proclaimed objective and the composition of the new organisation reveal its conservative nature. The new party aimed to establish 'a united front to fight the communistic tendencies'.² Four Wollongong aldermen took the initiative in forming a local branch. They hoped to rally conservatives behind the 'law and order' platform of their mayor, W.L. Howarth. Apart from these four local body members and Howarth, the elected executive of the branch contained the president and at least two other members of the New Guard.³

The Wollongong branch was disregarded, however, when the UAP advisory council without any local consultation, elected

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²Illawarra Mercury, 4 December 1931.

³The full executive of the branch was: chairman, Dr H.H. Lee (Wollongong alderman); vice-chairman, T. Kiernan (builder, previously president of the All For Australia League and Wollongong alderman); committee, P.C. Pryor (accountant), G.A. Todner (clerk), J. Rogers (shopkeeper), J. Clowes (Bulli Shire Councillor, school teacher and orchardist), J.P. Caddy (manager, Metal Manufactures), H.R. Lee (industrial adviser to the Port Kembla copper companies), J.B. Wells (storekeeper), C. Statham (president Nationalist Association), W.A. Lang (builder, Wollongong alderman), Dr N.E. Kirkwood (president of Wollongong New Guard locality).
as the party's candidate, W.R. McNicoll, a Goulburn school teacher. For a time the Wollongong branch considered running Howarth as their own candidate. To forestall such a move McNicoll visited Wollongong to meet with local party organisers. The latter continued to hold out for a pre-selection ballot, terms which McNicoll and the party executive eventually accepted. In the event McNicoll won the ballot much to the satisfaction of the UAP executive which preferred a less controversial candidate than Howarth.

McNicoll's credentials for a campaign, in which loyalty and patriotism were to be paramount, were impeccable. The principal of Goulburn Presbyterian Ladies College since 1921, McNicoll had volunteered the day war broke out and sailed from Australia a Lieutenant. He was given command of the 6th Battalion of the AIF and was General Officer Commanding the 10th Infantry Brigade in France from 1916 to 1919. One of the first ashore at Anzac he was twice decorated, receiving the DSO in 1915 and the CMG in 1917. He returned to Australia a Brigadier-General.

Some Wollongong conservatives did, however, combine to put up an independent candidate. He was M.P. Sheppard, a billiard saloon proprietor and SP bookmaker, who styled himself on 'Independent All For Australia' candidate. A thirty-four year old ex-serviceman, he offered a hotch-potch of conservative panaceas. He put forward a programme of 'conservative centralism' under which a stronger non-party

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1 Goulburn Evening Penny Post, 30 November 1931, 1 December 1931.

2 The Wollongong branch remained dissatisfied. The pre-selection ballot was conducted amidst some confusion. The ballot was held at a hastily convened meeting at Goulburn. Many delegates attended the conference believing they were required to endorse the nomination of McNicoll. There were eventually four candidates Howarth, McNicoll, H.C.M. Garling (Sydney), G.A. Dunn (Reid's Flat). Ibid., 2, 3 December 1931.

3 From 1934 to 1941 McNicoll was Administrator for the mandated territory of New Guinea. He was later knighted for his work in organising the relief of Rabaul after a volcanic eruption in 1937.
federal government would be run on business lines. As a corollary he opposed the new state movement and called for the abolition of the states, which he no doubt viewed as harbourers of Langism. By contrast he advocated the strengthening of local government as providing regional bastions of conservatism.¹

Throughout the campaign McNicoll stressed both his Australian patriotism and his loyalty to Britain. Neither sentiment, he asserted, was shared by Labor, whether of the federal or state variety. Under the influence of foreign agitators and communists, Lang was about to dishonour Australia's British heritage. This was at a time when the failure of the League of Nations to curb Japanese attacks on China left Australia peculiarly open to a 'menace from the East'.² McNicoll saw this new menace as both military and racial. It did not matter that Scullin rather than Lang was the Federal Labor leader for either would lead the country to disruption. However, by voting for the UAP the electors would ensure that Australia became 'better and whiter'³ than in the past.

Labor voters were confronted with a choice between H.P. Lazzarini (Lang Labor) and M. Tully (Federal Labor). The federal party had little backing in Wollongong. Unions declared themselves for Lang, and even the local branch of the FEDFA, whose federal executive supported Scullin, sided with the state party.⁴ Consequently Tully had no real organisational support and his campaign was little more than a showing of the federal party's flag. His one reported address in Wollongong was heckled.⁵ Lazzarini's position was a difficult one. As a member of the dissident Lang Labor faction he had little that was positive to offer his supporters.

¹Illawarra Mercury, 11 December 1931.
²Ibid.
³Ibid.
⁴Ibid., 7 April 1931.
⁵Ibid., 11 December 1931.
A vote for Lazzarini was essentially a protest against the economic orthodoxies of the major contending parties. In elaborating his view that the depression was man-made, he pointed to the apparent paradox of want in the midst of plenty:

...nature is full to overflowing. In travelling through the country there is wheat, wool and an abundance of everything, which conditions three years ago would have been taken as being hopeful of a prosperous time. Nature has not failed us, the birds sing, the animals are silk and happy as they graze in the pastures, and man, only man, is prepared to starve in a land of plenty.1

Lazzarini blamed the Federal Labor government which had abdicated and allowed the bankers to govern: Sir Robert Gibson, governor of the Commonwealth Bank, and not Scullin ruled. He offered no apologies for his part in bringing down the Federal Labor government and declared he would 'sooner get out fighting than sit in a parliament playing a confidence trick on the people'.2

Wollongong electors, who went to the polls on 16 December 1931, chose overwhelmingly to support the Lang faction rather than the federal Labor candidate. After first preferences had been counted Lazzarini (10,670) was well clear of Tully (1,268) and comfortably ahead of McNicoll (7,111). 3 The Labor majority in Wollongong was, nevertheless, not sufficient to ensure the return of Lazzarini. The same voting pattern was not followed in other parts of the electorate. With heavy support from rural districts and a strong personal vote in Goulburn, McNicoll won the seat although only after preferences were distributed.4 Although Lazzarini won every polling booth in Wollongong his majorities were less decisive

1Ibid.
2Ibid.
3CPP (Session 1932-3-4), p.114.
4The full voting figures were: H.P. Lazzarini, 18,948; W.R. McNicoll, 21,762; M.P. Sheppard, 496; E.B. Tully, 4,254. Sheppard's preferences were distributed as follows: Lazzarini, 61; McNicoll, 309; Tully, 126. Tully's preferences went to Lazzarini, 2,933, McNicoll, 1,447. Ibid.
than at the previous election and reflected the division among Labor supporters which had led to the defeat of the Scullin government.

The confusion within labour ranks and the deep-seated reaction of Wollongong’s conservative groups to the threat of Lang are also revealed in the local government elections decided on 5 December, exactly two weeks before the federal poll. Though this contest was overshadowed by the federal campaign, anti-Labor aldermen and councillors considered it an opportunity to inflict a crushing defeat upon the Langites and the communists. It proven to be an uneven contest. The Illawarra Trades and Labor Council which had, in the recent past, co-ordinated the efforts of worker-candidates was now defunct and as a consequence Labor men campaigned more or less as individuals.

By contrast, businessmen were well prepared. In the contest for the Bulli Shire Council where Labor representation was greatest, businessmen candidates mounted an extensive campaign. They did not scruple to describe the sitting Labor members, L.B. Kelly and T. Gibson, as communists of the ‘worst kind’, who did not preach their doctrines openly in the streets, but insidiously spread them through the homes of unsuspecting citizens. To counter this baleful influence, Labor’s opponents offered tins of lactogen to needy families. Led by J. Clowes, a school teacher with interests in real estate and a committee member of the recently formed Wollongong UAP branch, they denounced their opponents as ‘men who unable to make good in the old country came here and were unable to make good here’. The accusation whatever its relevance was untrue. Both Gibson and Kelly were natives of Wollongong. Born in Thirroul, in 1888, Gibson had trained as a school teacher and taught in various New South Wales country districts before volunteering during the early months of World War I. He was blinded while on active service in France and later retrained as a physiotherapist in London before returning to Thirroul in 1921. With Kelly he had been

1 Illawarra Mercury, 4 December 1931.

2 This biographical sketch is based on material gained in an interview with Mr T. Gibson on 5 September 1972.
elected to the Bulli Shire Council in 1928, and was an executive member of the Thirroul ALP branch. Both offered simply to do their best for the unemployed, a policy which had little appeal to nervous ratepayers aroused by a vitriolic campaign. Both were defeated.¹

If anti-communist propaganda was absurdly overdone in Bulli, there was some ground for suspicion in Central Illawarra where five well-known members of the Communist Party were nominated.² Led by P. (Pat) McHenry they did not publish a programme and their campaign was barely mentioned in either local newspaper. They were probably seeking to circumvent the council's ban on political demonstrations. If they were returned, they would gain a platform from which they could criticise local authorities and expound their party doctrines free from the threat of arrest. None was successful; all received few votes and had to put up with some physical opposition.³

In the municipality of Wollongong there were no official communist candidates nor any organised Labor ticket. However sitting aldermen, all of whom were now candidates nominated by the Progressive Association, left nothing to chance. To avoid splitting the conservative vote they obtained from sub-branches of their association an undertaking not to run candidates against them. Labor candidates campaigned against Howarth and for better treatment of the unemployed. On the other hand, Progressive Association candidates promised to provide order in the streets and 'sane' economical administration in the council. It was a programme more likely to appeal to ratepayers; indeed the entire ticket was returned.⁴

After the crushing defeats suffered by Labor in the federal and local body elections the criticism of Lang within

¹Illawarra Mercury, 11 December 1931.
²The five Communist candidates were: P. McHenry, W. Blake, A. Curnuck, Mrs E. Curnuck, P. Martin.
³Illawarra Mercury, 4 December 1931.
⁴Ibid., 11 December 1931.
the labour movement intensified. In December 1931 the Illawarra Trader and Labor Council refused to accept the imposition of a "tax of 1s in the £ on wages simply because it was enacted by the state Labor government." Thereafter the council was severely critical of the Lang government's treatment of the unemployed. In July 1931 it denounced the use of police to evict unemployed tenants. It complained also that Lang, by his inaction, was countenancing the arrest of workers who were simply defending their right to free speech. Moreover, the attempt by the New South Wales government to regulate the distribution of unemployment relief was unanimously condemned by the council.

This council protests emphatically against the vicious policy of the Lang government regarding food orders. This policy definitely places the Lang Government in line with all other anti-working class governments throughout Australia whose first consideration is protection of capitalistic interests. We pledge ourselves to stand solidly with the unemployed workers in their fight against the new regulations and for a better standard of relief for the unemployed.

By 'unemployed workers' the council meant the Unemployed Workers' Movement. It had earlier declared its support for this body rather than the more moderate Unemployed Workers' Union.

Moderates were alarmed by the influence which the Unemployed Workers' Movement had established over the workless and the increasingly radical demands of its spokesmen. Further, trade union officials condemned the efforts of unemployed leaders to mobilise workers in support of the demands of the unemployed. Some unions began to question publicly the alliance between the Labor Party and the extremists. Port Kembla waterside workers were voicing this growing caution when they voted to disassociate themselves

1Ibid., 4 December 1931.
2Attorney-General's File, 7/809 passim; Illawarra Mercury, 7 July 1931.
3Sydney Morning Herald, 8 September 1931.
from the more extreme labour organisations 'such as the Workers' Defence Corps and the Workers' International Relief'.

In December 1931, after receiving reports from the districts, the Central Council of the Miners' Federation called for

...an immediate consolidation of the workers in preparation to combat the attacks now being made by the employers and their agents. In order to accomplish this objective it is necessary that all working-class bodies should co-operate on the basis of a common policy. With this end in view Council recommends the co-ordination of the unemployed movement in order that the divisions which now exist may be overcome and the best interests of all unemployed workers be advanced on the basis of a programme of immediate demands applicable to the whole of the workers who are now unemployed. We further recommend to our members now working to make common cause with the unemployed in the struggle for the achievement of their objective, i.e. work at trade union rates, or a decent standard of living for those workers who are now denied the right of employment under capitalism. The Central Executive to confer with the Executive of the ALP with a view of acting on similar lines.

The reports which prompted this resolution stressed growing communist influence among the unemployed. Trade union officials were critical of the organisation adopted by the Unemployed Workers' Movement. Many considered that the unemployed should be represented by their respective unions. Some were also alarmed by the radical stand now being proposed by the socialisation units. In October 1931, a sub-committee of the socialisation units had brought down a report which suggested that the take-over of power was not dependent on the collapse of capitalism, and that it could come only through seizure by revolutionary violence. Moreover, the report suggested that the revolutionary moment had come.

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1 Ibid., 20 November 1931; South Coast Branch Waterside Workers' Federation Minute Book, 12 October and 19 November 1931.

2 CCM, 1-4 December 1931.

3 See pp.163-6.
Once in power the working class itself could destroy capitalism and initiate the social revolution. The report exhorted the Labor Party to fulfil its socialisation objective by giving a lead to the working class.¹

Alarmed by the radical proposals of the socialisation sub-committee and by the growing influence of communists and radicals Lang moved against them. In January 1932 W.A. Davies, now Minister of Education and an ardent Lang supporter, carried out a purge of the party's Wollongong branch. In doing so he was implementing the directive of P.J. Keller, president of the New South Wales Labor Party, that 'auxiliary bodies' were in fact offshoots of the Communist Party and that no member of the Labor Party could simultaneously be a member of any auxiliary body.² At a specially convened meeting of the Wollongong branch Davies complained that workers, deluded by the frequent name changes of the communist front organisations, were being 'snared into becoming semi-communists'.³ The branch had earlier, he alleged, gone against his advice and affiliated with the Workers' International Relief. This, however, he said would be the last time the communists would 'white-ant in Wollongong'.⁴ In his view there was no need for revolutionary action in Australia and he threatened to uproot the communists by swamping the branch with five hundred new members.⁵ The meeting then voted by twentysix to fourteen to implement the executive ruling and the defeated 'auxiliary' supporters withdrew.⁶

¹A full account of the Payne Report as it was commonly known, appears in Robert Cooksey, Lang and Socialism, pp.49-57, 58-60.

²Keller named eleven organisations: the United Front Against Fascism, the Workers' International Relief, the International Class War Prisoners' Aid, the Friends of the Soviet Union, the League Against Imperialism, the Militant Minority Movement, the Unemployed Workers' Movement, the Anti-Eviction League, the August 1 Demonstration Committee, the Workers' Defence Corps and the Young Communist League.

³Illawarra Mercury, 8 January 1932.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid. See also Sydney Morning Herald, 7 January 1932.
To head off these socialist stirrings within the Labour movement and at the same time preserve his reputation far in fancy, Lang attempted to balance such purges by taking the socialist programme his own. His tactics were no more than a long plan of the practical side the socialisation drive should take. The "Lang is Right" campaign, launched by the New South Wales Labour Party branches in the early months of 1932, presented Lang as the unerring leader of a socialist Labour Party. It produced a considerable response among Wollongong unionists, and the local Lang's socialistic rhetoric was greeted with an enthusiasm unparalleled in the formation of new party branches at Wollongong, Mt Keira, Woonona Heights, Towradgi and Dapto. The real strength of the Wollongong Labour movement, however, lay with the unionists and other trade unionists and the Wollongong Trades and Labour Council gave Lang anything like substantial support. J.W., the MLA secretary to Jim Sbolia, had been one of those present at the Wollongong meeting. So too were a significant number of party activists whose involvement in branch activities in many cases spanned more than a decade.

A. Smalley, the recently retired secretary of the Mines' Federation (Southern District), had supported Davies when the Labor organised the expansion from the Wollongong ALF union, and his successor, W.J. Bennetts, was elected to the executive of the reconstituted branch. Yet the southern miners made no official move to endorse Langism.

The completeness with which the party purged itself of militants is evident from the membership of the branches and their subsequent actions. Few of the new officials had been prominent in the Wollongong Labour movement. None was a participant in the street protests. None, like V.Y. Mathias, editor and publicity officer of the reconstituted Wollongong branch, were ardent Lang followers. A Labor Daily reporter sent to Wollongong to replace R. (Bill) Allen who had been dismissed for his constant criticism of the Lang government, Mathias gave scant and adverse coverage to political protest.

1South Coast Times, 15 April 1932.
in Wollongong and suppressed criticism of Lang, thereby depriving militants of an important forum.

Some of the new party branches were deliberate creations of the Lang political machine. The Dapto branch, for example, at its inaugural meeting not only proclaimed its allegiance to Lang, 'the only man in the Commonwealth who had the interests of the workers at heart', but also expressed contempt for the Payne socialist section. More significant than these formal protestations of loyalty to Lang was the decision to establish an ALP Central Relief Committee. This body was to 'launch a comprehensive scheme to control relief distribution for the entire South Coast'. By so doing they hoped to squash 'sinister forces' which had 'misled' the unemployed. This thinly veiled challenge to the Unemployed Workers' Movement became more explicit when the central relief council voted not to accept delegates from that organisation. The ALP branches, however, proved incapable of financing such an ambitious relief scheme. Any chance of success the venture may have had was ruined by the refusal of trade unions to offer their financial assistance.

These widening divisions within the Wollongong labour movement, and the growing disillusionment with Lang may be observed in the 1932 state elections. The dismissal of Lang by the state governor, Sir Philip Game, on the 13 May marks the end of what one historian believes to be 'the most turbulent - perhaps almost a revolutionary period - in New South Wales political history'. The initial reaction of Wollongong workers to this 'stab in the back' was one of stunned confusion. Mass meetings of coalminers at Woonona and Fairy Meadow declared support for Lang in his 'present

1 Ibid.
2 Ibid.
3 Ibid.
4 Robert Cooksey, Lang and Socialism, p.4.
fight' and went no further. Attention turned quickly to organising a campaign for the return of a Lang government to office in the state election made necessary by his dismissal.

Both the Bulli and Illawarra electorates were considered safe Labor seats, but current trends within the labour movement and within the community at large made past performance less useful as an electoral guide. Militant workers denounced Davies for his role in the purge of local branches. Bulli miners criticised the failure of Lysaght, their ageing and ill parliamentary representative, to support rank and file protests and accused him of being insensitive to the sufferings of the unemployed. Moreover, his resignation as Attorney-General in June 1931, ostensibly on a matter of principle, made Lang supporters suspicious of him.

The consolidation of conservative ranks made a closer contest likely. In April 1932 branches of the UAP were formed at Wollongong and Port Kembla. To the nucleus of Wollongong aldermen who directed anti-Labor political activities was added a group of Port Kembla industrialists. This alliance between industry and local business was a fragile one held together mainly, as later events were to show, by opposition to Lang. The old guard once again championed Howarth for the UAP nomination, but they were outvoted by those who thought Howarth had been too patently partisan in his administration of municipal affairs to risk as a candidate. The Wollongong mayor had alienated many moderate Labor supporters, the very voters the UAP needed to woo if it were to win the seat. The local branch therefore supported P.L. Cantwell, vice-president of the party and a Sydney real-estate agent as a businessman candidate with no local record to live down.

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1 Labor Daily, 17 May 1932.

2 See DMB, for copies of letters from Lysaght answering criticisms by miners.

3 Illawarra Mercury, 12, 19 June 1931; interview with Mr W.H. Woodward, 6 September 1972.

4 Illawarra Mercury, 3 June 1932.
Illawarra Mercury, Howarth rejected Cantwell as an outsider and announced that he intended to run as an independent candidate. He was later persuaded to withdraw, but the ubiquitous billiard-saloon proprietor, Sheppard, again contested the seat as an alternative conservative candidate.

Cantwell, as did the UAP throughout New South Wales, promised 'sane government'. He equated Langism with revolution. Lang Labor had endeavoured to bring about a state of chaos by smashing the Premiers' Plan, by repudiating interest and by defying the Commonwealth in the hope that the civil strife which would undoubtedly follow might open the way for insurrection. To secure work in the new order men would be compelled to join a union and hence all would be subjected to the dictates of the 'Red executives of Trades Hall'. Lang's ten per cent Mortgage Tax Bill was said to foreshadow the seizure by the government of all homes and farms. Under Labor New South Wales would pass from 'a nation of free men to the servitude of slaves under the dictatorship of the Trades Hall Socialists'.

The effect of these scare tactics was to encourage physical intimidation of individual candidates and the disruption of campaign meetings. Davies claimed that the visit of New Guard leaders Eric Campbell and Captain F. De Groot was a provocative act inciting violence. Guardsmen from Nowra, Berry, Kiama and Wollongong endeavoured to disrupt Davies' election speech at Jamberoo and physical violence was averted only by the presence of miners with pick handles at the ready. Intimidation was not one-sided. A Corrimal meeting listening to R.J. Roberts, the UAP candidate for Bulli, was disrupted by what his supporters termed 'insensate and

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1Ibid., 20 May 1932.
2Ibid., 3 June 1932.
3Ibid.
4Ibid.
5Ibid., 26 September 1932. Also interviews with Dr N.E. Kirkwood, 1 December 1972. See also Appendix I: The Bulli Riot, pp.365-77.
crude' interjections delivered in a 'foreign twang' or 'old country dialect', topped off by the singing of the 'Red Flag'.

The removal of Lang from office and the ferocity of their opponent's attacks, compelled both Labor candidates to defend past performance rather than elaborate new policy. Davies denounced the Premiers' Plan and reaffirmed his faith in his Leader. Like Lang, he found scapegoats to carry the blame for the depression and the Labor Party's inability to curb its impact. Lysaght, now ill and confident in the knowledge that the coalminers' vote would secure his return, barely campaigned at all.

As freely predicted by local and state press, Wollongong electors returned both Labor members, although with greatly reduced majorities. In the Illawarra seat Davies, finished just 67 votes ahead of Cantwell and won on the second preferences of the Federal Labor and Communist candidates. The closeness of the contest, however, resulted not from a splitting of the Labor vote but from a straight transfer of votes by moderate Labor supporters to the conservative candidate. The same trend is evident, though to a lesser degree, at Bulli where the coalminers voted overwhelmingly for Lysaght.

1 Ibid., 3 June 1932.

In Bulli the full results were: E.H. Bostick (Communist) 404; A. Howie (Federal Labor) 460; A.A. Lysaght (State Labor) 7,590; R.J. Roberts (UAP) 3,634. Illawarra votes were recorded as follows: W. Blake (Communist) 353; P.L. Cantwell (UAP) 7,133; W. Davies (State Labor) 7,057; J. Scarlett (Independent) 61; M.P. Sheppard (Independent) 201. Preferences were distributed as follows:

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<td>Blake, W.</td>
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<td>120</td>
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<td>Cantwell, P.L.</td>
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<td>Davies, W.</td>
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<td>Totals</td>
<td>14,805</td>
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Source: NSWPP, 1932, pp.171-94.
The alienation of moderate Labor supporters, evident at the polls, was matched in succeeding months by equally serious inroads into Lang's support among party activists. On the coalfield dissatisfaction with Lang's treatment of the militants and his alleged use of the Labor Daily as a personal propaganda vehicle grew during the early months of 1933. The discontent was most clearly revealed during a by-election made necessary by the death of A.A. Lysaght, the member for Bulli, on 3 May 1933. A safe Labor seat, Bulli attracted fifteen candidates for a pre-selection ballot by local party members and affiliated unionists. The nomination of A.C. Willis ensured that the ballot would provide a measuring stick against which local attitudes could be gauged and foreshadowed conflict with the New South Wales executive.

A Welshman and coalminer, Willis had migrated to Australia in 1911 with religious non-conformism, industrial unionism and syndicalist socialism as the main pieces of his ideological baggage. By 1913 he was leader of the miners on the southern coalfields of New South Wales and in 1915 became foundation general secretary of the Miners' Federation. When the industrial section of New South Wales Labor expelled W.M. Hughes and set out to capture Labor organisations Willis had been to the forefront. In 1919 he launched the OBU organisation. His leadership of this socialist section resulted in his expulsion from the party. Readmitted in 1923, he became vice-president of the Executive Council during the Lang Government of 1925-7 and in the depression government. At the beginning of April 1931 he sailed for the United Kingdom to become New South Wales Agent-General. Prior to his departure he was considered the most powerful man next to Lang in the New South Wales ALP. From his position in the Upper House Willis had exercised a general supervision of Lang's legislation and controlled the Labor Daily. In June 1932, when Willis was recalled to Australia by Lang's successor, B.S.B. Stevens, of the UAP, he discovered that Lang had obtained control of the Labor Daily and was not prepared to accommodate a man of his talents. His request to assume his former position as manager of the Labor Daily and chairman of directors was ignored. Undoubtedly Willis saw
victory at Bulli as a first step on the road to a political comeback. ¹

Lang certainly interpreted Willis's nomination as a direct challenge to his leadership and took steps to close off this avenue to a dangerous political rival. The state executive moved to dispense with pre-selection and invoked its authority to make an executive appointment. The executive argued that there was insufficient time for a pre-selection ballot and ruled that the Bulli Electorate Council would be acting improperly if it proceeded with a ballot. ² The electorate council, however, argued that there was sufficient time and complained that branch autonomy was being whittled away by continued executive direction. In 1930 and again in 1933 dissatisfied with Lysaght's high handed attitude the council had endorsed the nomination of W.H. Woodward for pre-selection. On both occasions, however, the nomination was rejected by the executive. ³ Opposition to an executive appointment came also from the miners' delegate board which on this occasion unanimously voted to support the Bulli electorate council ⁴ and threatened to run an industrial candidate should pre-selection be refused. ⁵ When the electorate council chose to ignore executive threats to appoint a candidate and distributed ballot papers on 18 May the southern miners executive, in a joint statement with the council, announced their support and asked all contestants


²Daily Telegraph, 19 May 1933.

³Illawarra Mercury, 25 February 1930; 14 March 1930; DMB, 12 March 1930. When interviewed Mr W.H. Woodward claimed that Lang set aside a ballot in which he had defeated Lysaght. Interview, 3 May 1972.

⁴Record Book, 6 May 1933.

⁵Labor Daily, 16 May 1933.
in the ballot to join 'the fight against the ALP executive'.

On the same day, a specially convened meeting of the state executive elected J.T. Sweeney as the official ALP candidate. Only two of the eighteen votes cast went to Willis. The remaining sixteen went to Sweeney while none of the other thirteen candidates received any support. The announcement of Sweeney's acceptance did not, as the Lang executive probably hoped, deter the Bulli electorate council which went ahead with its ballot. As Lang feared Willis topped the poll and was immediately nominated to contest the by-election. Despite accusations of disloyalty and executive claims that the ballot was rigged, the council voted by twenty-four to three to endorse Willis as its candidate.

By selecting Sweeney, Lang hoped to tap the reservoir of parochialism from which any strong local miner-candidate could draw. To this end he had earlier sounded out the southern district miners president, F. Lowden and later W.H. Woodward and L.B. Kelly, president and secretary of the Thirroul ALP branch. Only when these approaches were rebuffed did Lang turn to Sweeney, the seventy year old retired southern district miners' secretary. Sweeney later polled sixty-three votes to Willis's 637 in the pre-selection ballot. An Australian, Sweeney was born at Campbelltown and lived all his life in the Wollongong district. Like Lysaght before him he was a devout Catholic and Lang undoubtedly, calculated that a bloc vote by Catholics (if such a vote existed) could be decisive in a close poll with the protestant Willis. Politically, however, Sweeney was a nonentity. As a loyal Langite he had assisted in the purge of radicals from the Wollongong branch and had avoided involvement with the free speech protests. Militant

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1Ibid., 19 May 1933.

2Sydney Morning Herald, 18 May 1933.

3Ibid., 24 May 1933.

4Labor Daily, 26 May 1933 and interview with Mr W.H. Woodward, 6 September 1972.

5Daily Telegraph, 22 May 1933.
coalminers were caustic in their criticism of his cautious attitude as district secretary and had earlier described him as a time-server with 'an eye open for a snug job in the social Fascist government machinery of state for his old age'.

The campaign provided a platform for discontented elements within the New South Wales labour movement. An unsigned manifesto circulated by trade union leaders demanded a greater voice in party affairs and asked affiliated unions and ALP branches to support a call for a special state Labor conference in July at which rank and file grievances could be aired. Socialisation units hoped the by-election would provide an opportunity to put their case. Moreover, the central council of the Miners' Federation threw its weight behind Willis and directed MLA's representing coalmining constituencies to support him. Lowden and Penrose, the leading southern mining officials, drew on all these grievances when they gave final voting advice to Bulli miners. They should vote for Willis because he was the endorsed candidate supported by all southern district lodges and local party branches and because he was the one candidate the state executive did not want. A vote for Willis, Lowden declared, was a vote for rank and file control and local autonomy.

Willis endeavoured to harness the support of all these groups. The pre-selection issue enabled him to run as a rank and file candidate. He professed support for socialisation and condemned Lang's wholesale expulsion of socialists. To the miners he pledged to free the Labor Daily from the clutches of Lang and his inner group and supported such industrial causes as the abolition of stone-dusting. These promises were encompassed by a larger commitment - to purify the labour movement.

Such a platform involved an attack upon Lang and the Lang mystique. Early in the campaign Willis tried to defuse

1 Red Leader, 5 February 1932.
2 Sydney Morning Herald, 24 May 1933.
3 Ibid., 27 May 1933.
4 Illawarra Mercury, 2 June 1933.
the personal issue by suggesting that Lang was a victim of
the machinations of a secret junta which had corrupted the
movement for its own ends. To condemn the body without
impugning the head, however, was too fine a distinction for
most Labor supporters and during the course of the campaign
Willis abandoned it. Mindless repetition of the 'Lang is
right' slogan had induced in the leader, Willis claimed, a
state of megalomania.\(^1\) There must, he said, be an end to the
dictatorship whether personal or collective, a neat way of
shifting his position.

Whatever hopes Willis entertained of minimising the
personal conflict with Lang were negated by the party leader's
vituperative campaign for his own nominee. Sweeney was
barely noticed during the campaign. It was Lang who featured
on the platform and in the press. To counter Willis' claim
to be a miners' candidate, Lang had J.M. Baddeley, the
ex-Labor minister of mines, open Sweeney's campaign.
Thereafter Lang spoke each night in the mining villages
appealing for solidarity. He castigated Willis as a dupe of
the conservative press, who like W.M. Hughes, W.A. Holman,
P. Loughlin and T.D. Mutch before him, was intent upon
splitting the labour movement.\(^2\) Willis was a job hunter, a
friend of an unknown 'inner group', and a top-hatted
gentleman from the halls of Westminster whose election would
result in the disintegration of the labour movement.\(^3\)

When the result was announced Sweeney topped the poll
with 5,331 votes while Willis (2,758) ran third behind the
UAP candidate W.A. Buttrell (3,052) and ahead of P. Martin
the Communist Party candidate (588). The result, however,
reveals the growing discontent within local labour ranks.

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\(^1\)Daily Telegraph, 31 May 1933.
\(^2\)Hughes and Holman, as federal and New South Wales Labor
leaders, split with the party to form Nationalist Ministries
during World War I. Loughlin and Mutch together with
H.V. Evatt, G. Cann and C.H. Murphy were expelled from the
New South Wales Labor Party in August 1927 for opposing Lang
in a Cabinet revolt. See Ian Turner, Industrial Labour and
Politics (Canberra, 1965), pp.97-121; Kylie Tennant, Evatt
Politics and Justice (Melbourne, 1972 edition), pp.64-5.
\(^3\)Labor Daily, 23, 25 May 1933.
The total Labor vote remained remarkably constant with that recorded at the 1932 state election and there was no leakage of Labor votes to the government candidate whose primary votes were down on the 1932 figure. Communist votes, though still few in aggregate, increased by twenty-five per cent.¹

Willis supporters attributed defeat to a whispering sectarian campaign and to the presence of Lang. After Sir Philip Game's 'stab in the back', of 13 May 1932, Lang was New South Wales Labor's prophet and martyr and his reputation for militancy was transformed into legend. Most electors remained unmoved by the political wrangling and were not easily persuaded to vote against an official Labor candidate, however nominated.

In the circumstances, it is somewhat surprising that Willis polled as well as he did. His absence from Australia during the early depression years undoubtedly weakened his position with the miners. Even before this, however, militants had been vocal in their criticism of him. In 1928 lodges challenged his endorsement as a southern delegate to a miners' convention.² He further alienated many miners by his opposition to an 'all out' strike in 1929. Militants regarded his support for socialisation as an election expedient aimed at exploiting rank and file discontent and advised radicals to repudiate him.³ Communist second preferences were directed almost equally to and against Willis.⁴ However, the fact that an unofficial Labor candidate could capture slightly more than one-third of the Labor vote was a measure of local dissatisfaction.

¹Primary votes cast in the 1932 state election totalled 12,088 compared with 11,817 for the by-election. The combined Labor vote (A.A. Lysaght and A. Howie, Federal Labor) in 1932 was 8,050. Sweeney and Willis together recorded 8,153 votes. The UAP vote fell from 3,634 in 1931 to 3,078 and the Communist Party vote increased from 404 to 586.

²See Chapter One, pp.14-5.

³Red Leader, 31 May 1933.

⁴Communist preferences were distributed as follows: Buttrell, 89; Willis, 292; Sweeney, 205.
The Lang victory at Bulli had important repercussions within the labour movement both locally and at the state level. The dispute between the Thirroul branch and the state executive continued. Preliminary discussions to heal the breach broke up in disorder.\(^1\) A subsequent meeting summoned by the branch executive defeated a resolution to accept the party platform and rules, as interpreted by the state executive.\(^2\) The suspension of the branch charter followed and a week later the state executive voted to 'reform' the branch.\(^3\) But any thoughts that the executive was now willing to accommodate the dissidents were quashed when members of the old branch were excluded from all discussions. Admission to a meeting called to elect new officials was limited to those who had earlier signed a petition which demanded that a new branch be formed and rejected proposals to reconstitute the original branch. The new branch so formed lacked vitality apart from the momentum given it by Lang's organisers and within three months could barely attract a quorum to meetings. The old branch executive considered swamping the new group, but opted instead to break completely from it. The unions which had previously sustained local party organisation remained aloof. What support the branch did receive came from a nucleus of Catholics who had campaigned for Sweeney.\(^4\)

The reluctance of Bulli miners to support the Lang branch was symptomatic of the widening gulf between the more militant unionists and the state ALP. For some time the Miners' Federation had been in conflict with the state executive over the control of the *Labor Daily*. The refusal of the paper to publish election propaganda for Willis produced renewed criticism of Lang's leadership and accusations that he was using the paper for his own political ends.

\(^1\)Record Book, 25 June 1933.

\(^2\)Ibid., 9 July 1933.

\(^3\)Ibid., 14 July 1933.

\(^4\)Ibid., 30 July 1933; interview with Mr W.H. Woodward, 6 September 1972.
Rumours that the Miners' Federation was preparing to lead an industrial splinter party had been given some credence by the threats of south coast miners to run an industrial candidate against Sweeney. Lang, however, hoped that his victory at Bulli showed he could rely upon the continued loyalty of the rank and file. But while the majority of Labor supporters were not prepared to vote against an official party candidate most miners were sufficiently alienated by Lang's tactics, both during and after the by-election, to contemplate retaliatory action. When asked by their federal executive to vote on the issue of continued affiliation with Lang Labor, southern miners voted 'overwhelmingly' in favour of severing connections.¹ Simultaneously most district lodges ceased to compel miners to subscribe to the Labor Daily.²

The disaffiliation of the miners and the faction-fighting within the labour movement weakened Labor's chances for the 1934 federal elections. The selection of T.D. Mutch as the UAP candidate for Werriwa was calculated to exploit this division. As a victim of the Lang political machine he could appeal to Labor supporters who were confused and disturbed by the recent turmoil. A former journalist on the Worker, Mutch had opposed the Lang faction and in 1924 lost a ballot for the party leadership to Lang by a single vote. This considerable body of support within the party ensured him a cabinet post in the Lang government (1925-7), but his relationship with the party leader was a strained one. Lang made continued efforts, both within the party and in public, to discredit Mutch's administration of the Education Department and eventually contrived his expulsion from the party. After his dismissal Mutch successfully contested his Botany seat as an Independent Labor candidate in the 1927

¹Sydney Morning Herald, 3 August 1933.
²Ibid.
elections. He lost the seat in 1930 however, when Lang ran a strong candidate, R.J. Heffron, against him. Thereafter Mutch turned to local government and re-entered politics, by way of an executive position in the All For Australia League, as the UAP candidate for Werriwa.

The campaign as it developed locally centred on two issues, Langism and credit. Mutch concentrated almost exclusively on denigrating Lang as a 'wrecker' who had disrupted government, destroyed honest men, almost ruined the state and contemplated smashing the Commonwealth and the banks as his final act of political vandalism. Apart from his personal anti-Lang animus, Mutch spoke in orthodox UAP fashion. He pledged sane government to restore business confidence and to accelerate economic recovery.

Lang spoke twice on behalf of Lazzarini who continued to elaborate the 'conspiracy of bankers' thesis. He advocated the freeing of credit by placing it in the hands of the federal parliament. Neither candidate was much disturbed by the Federal Labor nominee, T.P. Lavelle. Stricken with pneumonia, he took no active part in the campaign. In a letter to the Illawarra Mercury, however, he asked workers to rescue the party from the grips of Langism by making Lazzarini their last preference.

The result was closer than commonly predicted. When primary votes were counted Mutch led by 420 votes. Federal Labor and Communist preferences, however, enabled Lazzarini to regain his seat with a final majority of 2,513. Boundary

1 From 1931 until 1937 he was an alderman on the Randwick Council.

2 Illawarra Mercury, 17, 24, 31 August 1934.

3 Ibid., 14 September 1934.

4 First preferences were distributed in the following way: W. Blake (Communist) 2,610; T.P. Lavelle (Federal Labor) 1,695; H.P. Lazzarini (State Labor), 22,561; T.D. Mutch (UAP) 22,981.

5 Of Lavelle's preferences 1,035 went to Lazzarini and 441 to Mutch. Of the 2,610 Communist preferences 2,584 went to Lazzarini and the remaining 245 to Mutch.
changes¹ and the influx of new Labor supporters to the industrial complex at Port Kembla assisted Lazzarini. On the other hand, the Labor victory tended to obscure divisions within the local labour movement. The ability of Mutch to attract a relatively high poll suggests that moderate Labor voters, who had transferred their support to the UAP in 1931 and in the state elections of 1932, again voted for the non-Labor party. It is possible also that many electors who had supported the Federal Labor candidate in 1931 now voted for Mutch. At the other end of the political spectrum unrest within the party resulted in an increased Communist vote. The Communist Party had not contested the seat of 1931 yet Blake, a coalminer, who gained a considerable following among the unemployed because of his activities in the free-speech campaign, doubled the vote he received in the 1932 state election.² His support was heaviest in the strictly coalmining communities and among the ill-housed Port Kembla workers where the communist vote trebled.

It is difficult to assess the inroads made into the allegiance of moderate Labor supporters since there was a corresponding breakdown in the coherence of the right. Anti-Langism had provided a rallying point for conservatives and reached its clearest expression in the New Guard which was, in part, an alliance between long-established property owners and the recently arrived industrialists and professional men. To the former, membership of, or sympathy with, the New Guard was part of a reactionary stand not only against the vicissitudes of depression, but also against unwelcome social changes. Some newcomers of anti-Labor views showed a remarkable willingness to explore radical ideas of a non-socialist kind, whether first advocated during the depression or revived from earlier times. There was no possibility in the 1930s of this kind of eclecticism, not to say political dilettantism, gaining any wide support.

¹Goulburn and Crookwell, centres which gave heavy support to the UAP in 1931, were removed from the electorate.
²see pp.184-5.
This trend may best be illustrated by the post-depression careers of Dr N.E. Kirkwood, president of the Wollongong New Guard locality, and E.L. Holmes, the Woonona cordial manufacturer and sometime organiser of the unemployed.¹ Until the depression Kirkwood took little interest in politics. His subsequent involvement was motivated more by fear of Lang than by any firmly held political philosophy.

In June 1932 with the ogre of Lang banished he turned more towards seeking a non-party political explanation for current economic problems. Like many of his contemporaries Kirkwood was attracted to the Henry George League. 'No man', he later wrote, 'is educated in social thought unless he is acquainted with the teachings of Henry George'.² To an acquaintance with George he added a reading of Ricardo's Law of Rents. In late 1933, for reasons that are no longer clear, Kirkwood split with the local Georgists and gave his support to a little-known Western Australian group, called the Liberation League. Seemingly an off-shoot of the Henry George League, the liberationists advocated 'the socialisation of ground rent', the abolition of all taxation and maintained that these steps would rid society of the curse of interest.³ The league claimed to put forward an 'Economic Program based on Natural Laws'.⁴ Kirkwood wanted society to 'socialise unimproved land values'. Within the movement there was considerable divergence of opinion as to how this should be achieved, but Kirkwood thought that the government ought to redeem land values by crediting landowners with a bond to the unimproved value of their property. Mortgagors would use such a payment to wipe out mortgages and thereafter pay rent to the community and not interest to non-producers.⁵

¹See Chapter Three, pp.125-6.

²N.E. Kirkwood (vice-president of Wollongong Rotary Club) and Harold Hewlett (assistant secretary) to S.E. Armstrong (chairman, International Service Committee Rawlins Rotary Club), 6 March 1934. Dr N.E. Kirkwood kindly gave me a roneod copy of this letter.

³Hamilton Lamb, An Outline of Liberation (Melbourne, n.d. probably 1934), passim. See also Liberator, 1 December 1933.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Hamilton Lamb, An Outline of Liberation, passim.
By securing economic justice and preventing the economic exploitation of the community liberationists hoped to remove the worst features of party government - the securing of concessions for conflicting financial interests at the community's expense. Their long-term political programme envisaged the abolition of state governments, the creation of a 'truly National Government' and the strengthening of local government. Short-term policy of the movement accommodated itself to whichever party offered greater scope for the advancement of its theories. After 1934 Kirkwood ceased to be a member of the UAP and the following year campaigned on behalf of his fellow liberationist G.H. Lamb, the principal of Kyneton College in Victoria. The latter contested the seat of Lowan as one of two endorsed United Country Party candidates for the Victorian state parliament. Throughout 1934 Kirkwood proclaimed his liberationist theories to Rotary Clubs, miners' lodges and public meetings and published his own broadsheet, Liberation. Critical of the unthinking conservatism of his former colleagues, Kirkwood urged them not to 'metaphorically put a red tie round the neck' of anyone who expressed dissatisfaction with the existing system. By 1935 he thought his ideas on social justice more attuned to the politics of the left and joined the ALP.

1 Ibid.
2 Lamb and the other United Country Party candidate M.E. Wottenhall, a retired farmer from Toorak, were the only nominations for the seat. For this reason, according to Dr N.E. Kirkwood, the United Country Party was prepared to endorse Lamb as a candidate standing on the Liberation platform. Lamb won the seat by 6,173 votes to 5,100. See Argus, 15 February 1935, 4 March 1935.
3 Apart from his contribution to An Outline of Liberation, some idea of Dr Kirkwood's propagandist activities and his economic thinking may be gleaned from 'The Vision Splendid: Rotary's Strategical Objective' (an address given to the Wollongong Rotary Club) 1934; from a more whimsical survey, 'Jackass Island', which appeared as an article in the South Coast Times, 5 April 1935; and from regular letters to the editor of the Illawarra Mercury, especially those of 4 and 8 March 1935, 1 October 1937.
The comparative speed with which Kirkwood moved from reactionary through radical right to a position left of centre was not matched by Holmes. In July 1932 Holmes abandoned the New Guard and became south coast organiser for the Douglas Social Credit League and established small study circles in the coalfield communities of Woonona and Corrimal. A more prolific propagandist than Kirkwood, he wrote numerous articles for New Era, the League's paper, and in September 1932 published two pamphlets: The right to live and Australia's real wealth.¹ The latter expounded his own thinking while the former was a practical guide to the Douglas Social Credit system. Man, Holmes argued, was for many reasons unable to adapt to a mechanised industrial world. In the first place, industry was in the grip of the credit monopoly which siphoned off the benefits of machinery and science which should accrue to society. Legislators, whether because they were incompetent, frustrated by monopoly capitalism or paralysed by the party machine, attempted merely to alleviate distress rather than seek a permanent solution.² Unlike Kirkwood, however, Holmes remained critical of Labor's socialisation policy,³ and vehemently denounced the communists. Yet, like Kirkwood, he gathered around him a group of men who rejected, or at least questioned, the status quo and opposed resolute conservatism as exemplified by the old guard in the Wollongong municipal council.

This opposition to hard-line conservatism was evident in the local government elections held in December 1934. The divisions within anti-Labor ranks were most apparent in Wollongong. The council had continued to clash with the unemployed and with relief workers. The conflict came to a head when the council prosecuted P. (Paddy) Malloy for

¹The right to live (Wollongong, 1932); Australia's real wealth and how to use it being a practical introduction to the Douglas social credit proposals (Sydney, 1932). See also New Era, 19 July, 13 October, 3 November 1932 and 22 February 1934.

²Holmes, The right to live, p.6.

³New Era, 22 February 1934.
collecting dues from relief workers in the streets. When the dole had been replaced by relief works in 1933, relief associations collected 1d per week from relief workers as a voluntary contribution. For six months the council had ignored the illegal collection of these dues. However, after a strike by relief workers who refused to do work normally performed by council labourers, the council prosecuted Malloy for soliciting in the streets. The relief workers claimed the prosecution was simply spiteful retaliation. W.L. Howarth's threat 'to resurrect the New Guard to give the workers the boot' was regarded as demonstrating the council's political bias. Speaking for the relief workers, R. (Bob) Allen placed the blame for Malloy's arrest squarely on Howarth who, he alleged, 'had gaolled workers on behalf of the capitalists and fascists'. Allen expressed the hope that 'some of the cows will be living when we take over - then the boot will be on the other foot'.

To hasten the defeat of 'Howarth and the fascists', Allen advocated that Labor should run a full ticket in the coming municipal elections, but there was little response. Yet, while Labor was too disorganised to hope for success at the local polls, divisions within the ranks of their opponents allowed at least a partial realisation of their objectives. The Wollongong Traders' Association declared itself opposed to the 'sectional' policies of the retiring council. It advocated an impartial administration and refused to re-endorse four sitting aldermen who, in the view of the association, were the instigators of 'this [sectional] policy'.

All four men were rejected at the polls. To some extent their defeat represents no more than the universal tendency

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1 South Coast Times, 23 February 1934.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid., 16 November 1934. The four aldermen refused endorsement were: W.L. Howarth, Dr H.K. Lee, T. Kiernan and W.A. Lang.
to punish public men associated with depression. The Illawarra Mercury put this point in more positive form. It claimed firstly, to recognise in the community a general desire for change. Ratepayers, considered the council to be 'too much of a happy family' and wanted 'new ideas and new men'. Secondly, the paper suggested that the political prosecutions instigated by the council had alienated the support of non-labour men. Finally, it put the unseating of the four aldermen down to 'the factionalism' of the anti-Labor groups.

There is little then in the electoral behaviour of Wollongong between 1930 and 1934 requiring explanation which differs significantly from national or state trends. With varying degrees of enthusiasm both Wollongong state electorates continued to return Labor candidates. The level of support given Labor in 1930 and again in 1932 conforms to state-wide trends. The substantial majorities given Lysaght and Davies in 1930 were a register of the general swing to Labor. Similarly the near defeat of Davies, in 1932, indicated a general confusion among the party's supporters and a suspicion of Lang among the uncommitted. At the federal level the loss of Werriwa, while greatly influenced by votes cast in rural areas outside the Wollongong district, emphasised the disillusionment of Labor supporters.

Nevertheless, there were some local peculiarities. The coming of big industry and the transformation of a rural-mining district into a sizeable industrial centre coincided with the onset of the depression. The transition as a consequence was marked by both economic and political tensions. There was mass unemployment, aggravated by the continued influx of men looking for work. At the very time when local government was under increased pressure for assistance its revenues were in sharp decline. The gap

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1 Illawarra Mercury, 11 December 1934.
between social resources and social need led to acrimonious political disputes and added to divisions within the growing community. In Wollongong, the district's administrative and commercial centre, conservative aldermen representing the old rural and trading interests predictably clashed with labour leaders and also were at odds with spokesmen for the new industries. Fear of Lang and of the communists obscured for a while the division between industrial and rural commercial interests.

Moreover, the political behaviour of Wollongong workers was not solely a reaction to events in Canberra and Sydney. Political strength lay with the southern miners whose national federation was an important pressure group within the New South Wales Labor Party. The coalminers gave powerful support to independent policies, such as demands for a restatement of the party's socialisation objective. As a result Lang was convinced that to maintain his position as leader of the party, it was necessary to crush the extremism of the regional industrial centres, a piece of mistaken strategy. He succeeded only in decimating the political wing of the Wollongong labour movement. The southern miners' decision to disaffiliate from the Labor Party was one form of protest against Lang's reluctance to accept militant initiatives, growing support for the communists was another. There were other options open to dissatisfied unionists. One course of action was to run 'industrial' candidates against local Labor parliamentary representatives. Recently canvassed during the 1933 Bulli by-election this suggestion foreshadowed moves to establish an alternative industrial Labor party organisation. However, most workers preferred for the moment to leave politics to the politicians and to seek remedies for their grievances in industrial action.
The latter half of the 1930s was more than a period of economic recovery in Wollongong, it was a period which saw a fundamental restructuring of the district's economy. Steel production eclipsed coalmining as the single most important enterprise. By creating a new market for existing industries and by stimulating new ones itself, the steelworks very largely determined the pattern of subsequent growth. Earlier predictions that Wollongong was about to become a 'steeltown' were realised. Whether measured by level of output or employment, the Port Kembla steel industry grew spectacularly during the mid-1930s. From 1932 onwards, during a period when German, French and Belgian steel was being dumped on the British market, the Port Kembla works were forging ahead. Distance protected Australian steel producers from the steel dumpers and, sheltered by a high tariff wall, AIS and its competitor BHP monopolised the post-depression market for consumer and capital goods. Moreover, the depreciation of the currency in 1931 which adjusted the terms of trade in Australia's favour had beneficial affects in Wollongong. Money costs were lowered in a relative sense and the incomes of primary producers raised. As a consequence the momentum of industrial expansion shifted to the metal industries. By the late 1930s Australia was one of the lowest-cost iron and steel producers in the world.


2 This paragraph has been drawn from the following sources: Helen Hughes, The Australian Iron and Steel Industry 1848-1962 (Melbourne, 1963), pp.117-9, pp.126-7; C.B. Schedvin, Australia and the Great Depression (Sydney, 1970), pp.304-8; F. Strahan, unpublished manuscript, 'A history of the Newcastle Steelworks', p.4; Essington Lewis Papers (Melbourne University Archives), Box 12, 14, 19, 21. passim.
Much capital expenditure was required however, before AIS could benefit from the improved market position. The plant lacked by-product coke ovens. There were also insufficient open-hearth furnaces to balance the potential production of the blast-furnace on the one hand and the capacity of the blooming and structural mills on the other. A continuous sheet bar and billet mill was needed. The power generating plant was too small for the size of the works and inadequate transport and service departments further hindered efficient operations.

The lack of funds for capital development was compounded by technical difficulties and short-sighted or ill-advised administration. A sheet metal mill which Hoskins bought in North America proved troublesome and almost a liability. Hoskins ignored perhaps the most important technical innovation of the decade, the Wilputte coke-ovens. By almost halving coking time and doubling coke output per man-day, the Wilputte ovens had allowed BHP to peg production costs even when 'throughput' was low during the depths of the depression. But Hoskins chose instead to rely on the less efficient Semet Solway coke ovens.1 Despite these handicaps, AIS continued to recover. For the year ending 31 May 1933 steel production rose above the 1929 level and the following year pig-iron output also topped the pre-depression figure. Total production remained about one-third as large as BHP's, and profits for 1934 reached £121,000, a record figure. But thereafter although the steelworks became busier, profits fell as Hoskins attempted to match BHP.

Since the end of 1932 it had become clear that the two English shareholding companies, Dorman Long and Co. and Baldwins Ltd, were unable to inject any capital into the Port Kembla steelworks. They had been overtaken by serious financial crises of their own and Hoskins was compelled to face the possibility that he might have to negotiate a merger with BHP his overmighty rival. He opened negotiations early in 1935 and by October the terms were settled. The end

result was more a takeover than a merger, with control of the company passing into the hands of BHP. Past rivalry meant that there were difficulties in welding two companies into a united whole, and for a period the assertion of BHP control was pursued with restraint.\(^1\)

The amalgamation of the two steelmakers was important in Australia's industrial history, for it created a monopoly in steel. In the Wollongong Port Kembla district it marked a period of rapid industrial growth. Within two years of the merger BHP spent £5,000,000 on plant development. Additional open-hearth furnaces were constructed and a new blast-furnace with a daily capacity of 1,175 tons, the largest in Australia and one of the largest in the world, was erected. By 1938 when the No. 1 blast-furnace was reconditioned to bring it up to date, Port Kembla produced half as much pig-iron as Newcastle and a year later the proportion increased to two-thirds. The inefficient coke-ovens at Wongawilli were replaced in 1936 by Wilputte by-product ovens, though it was not until 1938 that the new ovens were operating. Mill capacity was increased with a new 19-inch continuous six-strand billet. The sheet bar mill was modernised and a new continuous 18-inch mill came into operation. Loading capacity at the jetties was increased by the construction of a new salt water channel and by the installation of new iron ore handling equipment. New power plants, offices and laboratories and auxiliary equipment contributed to a fuller integration of the whole plant. Moreover, unlike Hoskins, BHP was able to finance the expansion from internal funds and bank overdraft, and not by new calls upon shareholders. In addition to stronger financial resources, BHP brought to the Port Kembla works more technical expertise and management skill than its predecessor had possessed. It had developed a staff training scheme to a stage where it could prepare men on the site for

\(^1\)BHP Annual Reports 1935, 1936; Blainey, The Steelmaster, pp. 118-9. BHP provided the chairman (H.G. Darling) and the managing director (Essington Lewis) for the reconstructed AIS board of directors. C.H. (Cecil) Hoskins (former chairman and with his brother A.S. (Sid) Hoskins joint managing director) became general manager. A.S. Hoskins stayed on as work's manager.
most non-technical posts. Further, specialist staff could always be transferred from the Newcastle works.

The iron and steel industry benefited from the relatively low prices of southern coal. Conversely, the recovery in coal consumption after 1933 was both caused and assisted by expansion at the steelworks. The output of southern collieries by 1937 was fifty-five per cent greater than in 1931. But prices continued to fall under the stress of competitive selling. Between 1932 and 1936, the average price of coal per ton dropped from 12s 11d to 11s 0d. Prices did not recover until 1938. Assisted by a coal strike in that year, they rose twelve per cent above their 1935 level and output was approximately equal to that of 1928.¹

The problems confronting colliery proprietors in the post-depression period were essentially those which had dominated the 1920s. There were too many mines competing on a market which, though improving, was inadequate. Moreover, the return of higher production levels created further difficulties. The curbing of developmental work had helped to keep costs down when orders were low, but after 1935 increased output reduced possible economies of this kind. One consequence of this was a fall in output expressed in man-days for all employees as the more accessible seams were worked out. Mechanisation was in time to reverse this trend, but the initial costs involved restricted profit margins further and in some instances was achieved only by incurring a trading loss.²

Recovery was accompanied by structural and marketing changes within the coal industry. BHP became the dominant employer and coal producer in the district. In 1936 it purchased Bulli and Mt Keira. Together with Wongawilli, obtained with the takeover of AIS, these mines had a combined output of 500,000 tons or close to half the district's annual output. Until 1937 the three collieries produced more

²Ibid., pp.16-7.
coal than the steelworks needed for coking and BHP used Wongawilli, the biggest but most costly of its mines, to operate, as a reserve source of coal.\(^1\) Self-sufficiency meant that for a period the company stood outside the southern Colliery Proprietors' Association and played little part in the latters' continued campaign for a more equal distribution of government coal contracts among the three New South Wales mining districts. Moreover, BHP competed against other collieries for the smaller local contracts, alienating itself further from the proprietors' association.

Steel production, however, soon outstripped the company's coal output. Early in 1937, P.R. Dyball, works secretary at Port Kembla, advised his superiors to buy 'all the coal we can'.\(^2\) Most local mines benefited from this changed policy, for BHP avoided long-term contracts with any one colliery and spread its coal purchases as evenly as possible. Its aims were to stimulate competition and push prices down. In the twelve months from May 1937 until June 1938, 292,000 tons of coal was purchased from five collieries.\(^3\) But this policy was in turn abandoned the following year, as demand for coal jumped further ahead of supply. The coal shortage drove prices upward and strengthened the negotiating position of collieries supplying the steelworks.\(^4\)

The 1930s were nevertheless a decade of stagnation on the coalfields. There was recovery but not growth. By 1939, production and employment figures had merely reached

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1 AIS Managing Director's Business Sheets: (BHP Archives), File 25, No.16-30, Carton 72, 25-28 March 1936.

2 P.R. Dyball to Essington Lewis, 23 April 1937. BHP Archives, File No.10, Carton 68.

3 The coal orders were distributed among the following collieries: Excelsior, 110,000 tons; Mt Kembla, 62,500 tons; South Clifton, 54,000 tons; Corrimal, 40,500 tons; Coalcliff, 25,000 tons. Ibid., 25 May 1938. BHP File, No.76, Carton 72.

4 Ibid., 10 August 1938. File No. 16-30, Carton 68. For example, average prices for New South Wales Railway contracts coal rose by between 2s 9d and 3s 6d per ton for large coal and by between 2s 2d and 2s 10d per ton for small coal.
pre-depression levels. Few miners were optimistic about the future. Many feared that the trend towards increasing mechanisation would result in overproduction and a fall in prices. A.G.L. Shaw, writing in 1943, struck a pessimistic note:

If the industry is to earn a 'fair' profit and pay a 'fair' wage in its slowly declining days, it demands some form of control over output and prices, and a 'planned' elimination of surplus capacity.  

There was, however, room for a more optimistic view, especially for the southern district, where the full impact of mechanisation was still some way off. Production on the southern coalfield in 1939 was only one-third as much as northern output, but there were signs of a shift in the geographical centre of the industry. The potential growth stimulated by proximity to a steelworks suggested that Wollongong and Newcastle coalfields would develop at the expense of the Maitland district. This trend was partially obscured at the time by the declining importance of mining in the local economy relative to the steelworks. The steelworks surpassed the collieries as employers of labour, and by 1937 employed approximately 5,000 men. In this experience Wollongong was perhaps the best example of a shift in the structure of the Australian economy towards the manufacturing sector.

The steelworks encouraged the establishment of further industries at Port Kembla. The Wilputte by-product coke ovens gave off sulphate of ammonia, benzol and tar. The benzol formed the basis for a petrol-blending plant established

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1 See Appendix E: Black Coal Production For Australian Coalfields, 1925-39, p.361; Appendix F: The number of mines operating and men employed in southern collieries, 1926-38, p.362.


4 For a general description of this trend see C.B. Schedvin, op.cit., pp.301-10.
in 1937 by Commonwealth Oil Refineries. Lysaghts Works Pty Ltd, in conjunction with BHP, established two mills at Port Kembla to produce motor-body and other high grade sheets. One was under its own name and the other, Commonwealth Rolling Mills Pty Ltd, in co-operation with American Rolling Mills Corporation, through Armco (Aust.) Pty Ltd. By 1939 Commonwealth Rolling Mills were producing special steels, including high speed and stainless steels. Service industries grew with the expansion of the steelworks. The volume of traffic handled at Port Kembla harbour increased from 390,000 tons in 1931-2 to 1,800,000 tons in 1938-9.3

Recovery in the older copper refining and manufacturing industries was more gradual. Metal Manufactures continued to pay ER & S, a shareholding company, inflated prices for its copper and had difficulty in competing with overseas companies which were so desperate for markets that they cut profit margins. A reduction in tariff rates in 1936 compounded this problem, as did the low world price for copper. However, periodic brief fluctuations in copper prices allowed Metal Manufactures to capture more of the Australian market. Yet, until 1938, production and employment figures failed to match pre-depression performance. Substantial upward movement in both spheres came only with the formulation in 1937 of a Commonwealth defence programme which encouraged armaments manufacture. Recovery at ER & S was also slow. Australian copper-mining continued to be sluggish, and even during periods of high copper prices few tributors were lured into

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1 Port Kembla Bulletin, 12 January 1938.

2 This sketch of industrial growth has been drawn from the following sources. B.H.P. Review, December 1938, pp.6-7, 20 and 24; February 1939, pp.8-9; April 1939, pp.16-17; June 1939, pp.1-5, 13-15; BHP Annual Reports, 1935-40; Seventy Five Years of B.H.P. Development in Industry (company publication, 1960), p.18; Helen Hughes, op.cit., p.118; Lysaght Venture (Sydney, 1930), pp.67-8, 18-19; J.A. Merritt, op.cit., pp.210-11.

the field. Blister copper from Chillagoe state smelters kept the refinery operating, but smelting remained an intermittent operation.¹

The impetus given to industrial growth by BHP established the district as the third most important growth point in New South Wales. By 1938 only Sydney and Newcastle surpassed Port Kembla in the fields of investment and employment. Industrial expansion was accompanied also by an unprecedented rate of population growth, most noticeable in Port Kembla. Annual surveys, taken by Port Kembla police after 1935, reveal an average annual increase in excess of 1,000 persons. Total population within the Port Kembla police district rose from 4,218 in 1935 to 5,096 in 1936, and to 6,976 in 1937.² The concentration was greatest close to the industrial areas and more than half the 2,758 newcomers settled in the township of Port Kembla. These figures, however, underestimate the actual increase, since the camping population was only cursorily counted. The police acknowledged wide seasonal fluctuations occasioned by a high 'floating population' which did not register at the time of the 'census'. Moreover, while the police district was broadly similar in area to the municipality of Central Illawarra it did not include within its boundaries a sizeable settlement at Coniston. Nor do these figures include those industrial workers and their families who chose to live in the township of Wollongong or adjacent mining villages.

With more people in already overcrowded areas, living standards deteriorated further. The key problem was, as before, an acute housing shortage. Applications for building permits reached a record level in 1934 and grew annually thereafter, but supply could not meet demand and gradually

¹ER & S General Superintendent's Report (ER & S Archives, Melbourne), 2 November 1937.
²Port Kembla Bulletin, 12 January 1938.
fell further behind. Between 1935 and 1938 the number of dwellings increased from 1,167 to 1,715 while the average number of inhabitants per dwelling rose from almost 4 to 4.5. This movement though small is yet significant and points to some pressure on housing resources. Moreover, the compilers of the statistics took no note of the quality of the home they counted, and included in their tally 'camps' and 'other improvised structures'.

The insatiable demand for housing resulted in overcrowding, jerry-building and profiteering. A worker and his family might huddle into a one-roomed hovel. As an even worse alternative, many were forced to sublet a single bedroom or sometimes merely the verandah of a house already occupied by three or four families. Landlords discriminated against couples with children, and rents for family accommodation strained even the resources of the better paid workers. Whereas in 1933 a tenant might, according to the Commonwealth Census, have paid on the average between 14s and 18s per week for a 'cottage', after 1937 it was common enough for him to pay between 25s and 30s for a single room. While the plight of families was distressing, single men were little better off. Boarding houses advertised 'warm beds day and night', but even on a system of rostering round the clock, there were still insufficient places for all. Short

1 Central Illawarra Shire Minute Books, 5 February 1935; Central Illawarra Shire Housing Report, 1943, pp.6-8. After 1934 Central Illawarra functioned as a shire. The decision to convert the municipality into a shire was taken in July 1934. There were several reasons for the change. First, there was no legal limit to urban or special rates which a shire might levy. Secondly, whereas the borrowing limit of a municipality was geared to the unimproved capital value a shire could borrow three times its annual revenue. A shire also received endowment in the form of government assistance. See Central Illawarra Municipality Minute Book, 11 July 1934; Central Illawarra Shire Minute Book, 4 January 1935.

2 Central Illawarra Shire Housing Report, p.8.

3 Central Illawarra Shire Minute Books, 5 February 1935.


5 Port Kembla Bulletin, 15 September 1937.
of pitching a tent, the only alternative open to the single man was to compete with married men for bedroom accommodation and thereby drive rents further upwards.

An increasing number of workers were therefore forced into the humpy communities. The Central Illawarra Municipal Council was alarmed at the growing untidiness and squalor of the camp sites as unforeseen numbers of workers were herded into them. Unofficial camps in the district were in at least as bad a state. The council could neither prevent the spread of shacks and hovels nor could it count them accurately. A camp census was compiled annually by the council's health inspector, but he emphasised that his surveys could not be regarded as complete. With this qualification, the census figures do nevertheless indicate the crude proportions of the problem. They show that the number of camp dwellers rose from 452 in October 1936 to 566 in 1937 and to 1,079 the following year. The 1938 census, which was the result of a more exhaustive survey, reveals more accurately the growing congestion especially in the Flinders Street camp. On an area of seven acres there were humpies and tents for 315 person in 1935. By 1937 a further 241 persons had entered the camp and a year later residents totalled 700.

The Reverend W.J. Hobbin, Methodist minister at Bulli, described in homely terms the dilemma of new arrivals who were seeking work and housing in Port Kembla:

'Wanted!' Eagerly the advertisement is read. Work is available at Port Kembla on the South Coast, New South Wales. Bags are packed. Soon the journey is completed; the place of big industry is reached. Then the enthusiasm receives a severe blow. Where are the bags to be unpacked? Where will one sleep for the night? Try to rent a house? It is in vain. Seek board and lodging. Every place is filled. Then the stark fact stares at you. The only available place is with hundreds of other victims in Flinders Street, or at Coniston, or on the lakeside camping area. In each of these places you will find men women and children living in conditions which are a disgrace.

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1 Central Illawarra Shire Minute Books, 17 October 1935.

2 Ibid., 10 October 1936, 18 July 1938, 23 May 1938; Port Kembla Bulletin, 12 January 1938.
The Flinders Street Camp, Port Kembla, 1936.
to any country in this age. Some of the dwellers have been there right through the depression years. Others are there because they could not secure houses when they arrived in eager quest of work after years of enforced idleness.

You will not be allowed to sleep out in the damp night air. Other campers will try to find a bunk for you. They will help you to pitch a rough tent. They will assist you to build a rough shack even though you might be forced to 'snatch your time' (draw your pay) at the works long before pay-day to secure some ready cash with which to procure the necessary material. You will also find a camp committee intent on keeping the area tidy and constantly agitating for better sanitary services.

The deterioration of the environment in which workers were forced to live was viewed by contemporaries as a legacy of the depression. Certainly building activity almost ceased, and speculators who had been previously active gave up business. Yet the workers saw in front of them every day the facts of exploitation, and wanted to know who, not what, was responsible. Indeed there were in Wollongong men profiting from the misfortunes of others. Farmers who rented old farm shacks and sheds were singled out for bitter

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Source: Central Illawarra Shire Housing Report, 1943, p.6. See also Central Illawarra Municipality Minute Book, 14 August 1934, 13 May 1935, for the winding up of the Illawarra Land Development and Investment Company and the Port Kembla Syndicate, development companies which had started business in 1927.
criticism. Together with shopkeepers they were held up as the worst landlords. Yet not all rack-renters could be described as middle class property owners. There is evidence to show that workers frequently exploited their fellows. Landholders complained of workers who, given free use of disused farm houses, sub-let rooms. Some demanded rent from humpy dwellers whom they had encouraged to settle on the owner's land.¹

Local government authorities could do little to prevent sub-letting. The laws controlling the occupancy of buildings made overcrowding the most profitable method of rack-renting. Permits for the construction of new flats or for the conversion of existing houses into flats were issued subject to strict regulations. But the New South Wales Housing Council complained that:

The person who turns an existing building into a rabbit warren is not required to comply with any conditions. Thus houses which, under ordinary conditions would have a rental value of say £3 a week for the one family they are intended to house, are let in separate rooms at a total rental of say £5 per week. Thus we get in thousands of cases houses accommodating a number of different people (often families) with one bath room and one w.c. to serve all the tenants and where the cooking is done in rooms that are living rooms bedrooms and kitchens combined.²

To restrain overcrowding and take the profit out of it the Central Illawarra Shire Council supported moves by the New South Wales Local Government Association to compel the registration of all lodgings. Moreover, it sought to strengthen the Public Health Act which, although stipulating a minimum of 500 cubic feet for all bedrooms, did not prohibit the room being used as a kitchen, bathroom, laundry and living room.³

¹Ibid., 28 February 1938.
²Letter from Housing Commission of New South Wales to Central Illawarra Shire Council, 24 May 1938, reproduced in Central Illawarra Shire Minute Books, 4 July 1938.
³Central Illawarra Shire Minute Books, 4 July 1938.
As overcrowding and shack-like housing multiplied, so problems of water supply and sanitation worsened. Conditions in the inner suburbs of Sydney and Melbourne may, it is true, have been quite as bad as those already described. But at Port Kembla all happened too fast and too haphazardly to be controlled by weak, inexperienced authorities. Sewerage continued to be a major problem. Port Kembla's basaltic clay soil was not sufficiently porous to allow proper disposal. Absorption trenches in these circumstances proved worse than useless. They became little more than foul cesspits which constantly overflowed. Rubble traps merely arrested large solids from passing into the outlet drains. In 1935 C.H. Webster, health inspector for the Shire of Central Illawarra reported:

One can stand in the streets of Port Kembla and see offensive matter running down the gutters exposed to the sun and before it reaches the main outfall (if ever it does) putrification [sic] has taken place and offensive odours are given off.¹

Such primitive, inefficient sanitation hastened the spread of epidemics such as typhoid and scarlet fever. Moreover, local doctors traced to these conditions a high incidence of sore throats, headaches, nausea, dysentery and depressed conditions which lowered resistance to all infectious diseases.² But the knowledge of medical practitioners was limited by the general reluctance of the poor to consult them. There was, for example, little response to an offer by Port Kembla doctors to immunise children from diphtheria free of charge.³ The doctors themselves suspected that in many cases chronic bronchitis and asthma among children were often wrongly diagnosed by parents as colds and not reported.⁴ Workers and doctors alike agreed that the incidence of disease was greatest in the camps where

¹Ibid., 30 September 1935.
²Ibid.
³Ibid., 4 July 1938.
⁴Ibid., 19 December 1938.
conditions were most primitive. Unable to afford the luxury of sanitary disposal facilities, camp dwellers made their own more or less primitive arrangements. In 1936 health inspectors reported that bush surrounding the settlements was becoming contaminated and that 'soapy drainage was lying about the doors of shacks'. As a further discomfort, those workers living closest to the industrial complex could hardly escape the stench of industrial refuse. The slightest winds carried dust from coal heaps into the camps, aggravating asthmatic and bronchial conditions as well as spoiling food and soiling washing.

The doctors' concern for the health of children in the camps was well founded for the bulk of camp dwellers were not itinerant single men, as was frequently claimed by their critics, but families. In 1936 slightly less than one-third of all camp dwellers were children under sixteen years of age. By 1938 this proportion had grown to forty-three per cent. While it was true that most families hoped to spend only a short time in the shacks, few managed to do so. The 1939 camp census reported that 'many families have been there for years', some for 'as much as five years'.

Each new camp added to the problems and the uneasiness of the local bodies. One of their fears was that the 'slum districts', as they named them, would spread and engulf adjoining areas and plunge the entire shire into an epidemic of plague proportions. To prevent this happening the Central Illawarra Shire Council brought in stricter measures of camp control. It tried to prevent overcrowding by stipulating that greater distances be left between humpies. Where it had previously charged for the collection of sanitary pans, the council waived all fees. This more humane approach was tempered, however, by periodic threats to close all official camps.

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1 Ibid., 16 March 1936.
2 Ibid., 19 December 1938.
3 Ibid., 11 October 1937, 28 February 1938.
4 Ibid., 10 October 1939.
Council spokesmen justified suggestions that camps should be closed in terms of undeniable hazards to the health of the campers. But it became increasingly clear that some of them were just as anxious to remove 'unsightly blots' from the landscape as they were concerned for the well being of the inhabitants. To some councillors, the campers were beyond the pale of society - 'men who will not attempt to live like civilized persons'.

As industrial expansion quickened in 1936 it became commonplace also for local government officials to question the need for anyone to remain 'permanently' in the camps. In presenting his 1936 camp report, C.H. Webster, the Central Illawarra Health Inspector, expressed indignation that:

There are persons with families who have been in constant employment for upwards of four years, who are still living in the camp. There may be an excuse for persons in destitute circumstances living under such conditions but certainly not for some of the occupiers of Flinders Street. Whilst admitting that there is a house shortage it would appear obvious that a person who has been in employment for four years has made little attempt if any to secure a home in better surroundings for the rearing of his family.

Webster's assumption that workers would accept substandard conditions so that they might live cheaply was put more explicitly by the mayor, R. (Bob) Shipp, an outspoken retired farmer. Some camp residents, he said, had no intention of ever trying to improve their living standards. Still others, he claimed were there to 'make money'. To support these assertions Shipp claimed that there had developed a thriving system of exploitation in the camps. 'Mess kitchens' were selling meals for profit, especially in the camp for single men, and married couples were making money by setting up 'boarding camps'. Both groups were erecting humpies and selling them, Shipp alleged, for 'an extortionate £40'. He denounced as unhygienic the sale of

1Ibid., 18 January 1937.
2Ibid.
3Port Kembla Bulletin, 22 December 1937.
4Ibid.
vegetables, fruit and fish from makeshift stalls in the camps, though there was some suspicion among the campers that on this point he was urged on by indignant shopkeepers.

Indeed Shipp's entire analysis reflects the reaction of rural propertied interests who hoped to benefit from rising land values and from increased trade which would follow the influx of population. They neither understood the inability of most campers to purchase a home nor appreciated their attempts to provide an alternative social network outside the boundaries of local society. Looked at from the campers' viewpoint, Shipp's complaints seemed self-interested. Their boarders were often friends or workmates with nowhere to live. Married couples, who provided meals for single men, similarly started by helping friends and found themselves in business to meet a need. Stalls, of course, could continue to exist in the camps only if they undersold local shopkeepers and the vehement protests of camp inhabitants against their threatened removal is sufficient testimony that they were doing so. Moreover, the sale of shacks is not necessarily evidence of profiteering but of the acute housing shortage.

To weed out those he called 'imposters' and to reduce the number of shanties, Shipp promoted a new camp policy. All temporary structures, whether within official camps or not, were registered and numbered. A levy of 5s per week was to be imposed on all structures and used to provide sanitary services and to install shower blocks. Control of the camps was to be placed in the hands of a camp steward who should report weekly to a council sub-committee. The results of this closer supervision were disappointing. When the scheme was implemented the campers resisted all attempts to collect the camp fee, some because they could not afford it and others because they felt life in the primitive camps was penalty enough. Efforts by the camp steward to regulate living conditions were at first more successful, but the continued inflow of new residents prevented any real improvement. In December 1939 the newly appointed health inspector, J.R. Morley, summed up the council's frustration:

1 Illawarra Mercury, 19 November 1937.
Camps are getting out of control, but I want to be humane. There is nowhere else for some of these people to go. I have chased people from pillar to post and at last turned the other way, when a camp is erected in some cases - genuine cases. However, despite what I have said about humanitarian methods, I say this. A man who will live for five years with his wife and family in a camp when he is working deserves to be chased from the district.  

A further argument used by councillors against the camps was that they harboured 'criminals', 'vandals' and 'metho-fiends'. Petty pilfering did occur and was especially rife among construction workers. However, there was only one proven case of vandalism. Frustrated in its efforts to extract its 'camping fee', the council placed the collection by the camp steward on a commission basis. Resentment at the fee, however, grew in direct proportion to the increased zeal with which it was collected. It was against this background that the camp steward's shack was burnt down. The older community in Port Kembla required no direct evidence to place the blame squarely on the campers. A few campers may have condemned the action, but probably all rejoiced when a discrepancy between the money collected from them and that passed on to the council brought about the steward's dismissal. But, in the main, order in the camps was maintained by camp committees who did their best to discipline the unruly in probably well-understood ways and by the only non-violent means at their disposal - ostracism.

There was little truth in the claim that campers were content to live in squalor rather than pay rent. It was becoming clear that they could not escape from a situation which they were almost powerless to influence. Gradually it became apparent to all parties to the dispute that ultimate responsibility rested with the firm which attracted workers to the district for its own profit. It was now up to BHP to solve the problem it had created. Company spokesmen 

1Ibid., 22 December 1939.  
2Illawarra Star, 28 April 1938.  
3Ibid., 5 December 1938.
professed sympathy for the notion and endorsed the argument, presented during the course of discussions with the Central Illawarra Council, that better housing would eventually profit the employers by producing healthier workers.1 Yet beyond expressing benevolent intentions BHP did very little. The need to transfer skilled technical staff from its Newcastle plant on occasions over-rove the reluctance to provide housing.2 Hoskins, the general manager at Port Kembla, privately approached the New South Wales premier, Stevens, for more government housing aid, but without success. The company, however, remained aloof from involvement in community life. Dyball, the company’s secretary, put BHP’s position bluntly enough at a meeting with a council housing committee. It was not, he said, company policy to undertake housing schemes and it would never countenance financial assistance to employees.3 The cold-blooded position adopted by the company contrasted with its policy at Whyalla where a company housing scheme operated.4 Workers at Port Kembla found little difficulty in guessing the reason. Where labour was in plentiful supply the welfare of workers was never a dominant concern to the company.

Dyball’s statement provoked a strong reaction and exacerbated a growing division of interests within the Port Kembla community. When Shipp threatened to ‘Let Port Kembla and the Australian Iron and Steel, Armco and Electrolytic Refining and Smelting go it on their own’, he was speaking for many Central Illawarra Shire councillors. In its composition, the council of the 1930s continued to reflect rural rather than industrial interests. The council elected in 1934 was almost wholly, ‘non-industrial’ in character. Of its nine members seven were farmers, one a shop assistant and one a labourer. In practice this rural dominance was reflected in

1Port Kembla Bulletin, 28 June 1939.
2AIS Managing Director’s Business Sheets (BHP Archives), File 25, No.16-30, Carton 72, 25-28 March 1936.
3Port Kembla Bulletin, 28 June 1939.
an ambivalent attitude towards industrial growth. Most of the farmer-councillors were pleased by the rise in land values which industrial growth stimulated, but all resented the expenditure of more than three-quarters of council revenue on Port Kembla, to the detriment of rural areas.

This attitude was not shared by many council officials who were daily brought face to face with the facts of camp life. Many of them came to accept the principle that some assistance should be given workers in order to help them obtain adequate housing. There were two elements in this concern. Officials and some councillors distinguished between the deserving and the undeserving worker. Secondly, it was commonly held that poor quality housing caused various social problems, ranging from poor health to juvenile delinquency. This environmental-determinist attitude was expressed by the Central Illawarra housing committee.

The necessity for homes is impressed on the visitor of this district by the large number of bag and tin shanties, in which employees of the various industries are forced to live and rear families under unhygienic conditions undermining the health of the occupants. Such environment can only lead to the demoralization of the children destroying that ambition which it is desired to instil in every Australian - to live a good, noble and righteous life.\(^1\)

In seeking to achieve this aim the Central Illawarra councillors called on the state government to sponsor housing projects and to provide homeless families with a permanent 'separate cottage'. Legislation existed in New South Wales for the provision of public housing but government activity in this sphere had all but ceased during the depression. As an emergency measure, the Unemployed Workers' Housing Trust provided housing or building materials for especially destitute unemployed men with four or more children. Valued at slightly more than £180 the cottages financed by the Trust lacked ceilings, were almost totally unlined and offered little more than basic shelter. Only twenty-seven such dwellings were built in the Wollongong district and there

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\(^1\) Central Illawarra Shire Housing Report, 1943, p.1.
were protracted delays in the delivery of building materials. 1

In 1935 the Central Illawarra Shire asked that the trust scheme be augmented. It proposed that municipal councils be empowered to resume crown land on which homes, similar in quality to those provided by the Trust, could be built. The houses should, the council suggested, be erected by the unemployed themselves who would subsequently be given the right of purchase over a period of fifteen years. Rentals were to be kept 'as low as possible'. 2 The government was sympathetic and E.S. Spooner, the Minister for Local Government, declared that:

The time was ripe for...the demolition of semi-slum areas...these must be faced in the future with a background of town planning advice if [removal] were to be really successful. 3

But despite this acceptance of the need for a planned housing programme the Port Kembla scheme was rejected by the state government on economic grounds. 4

The methods of financing home-buying in the post depression era were beyond the reach of most workers. The Rural Bank of New South Wales under the Rural Bank Act (1932) advanced money up to seventy-five per cent of the bank valuation of the house. But the bank was primarily a lending institution seeking the surest investment for its capital. It operated in the main, to serve clients with substantial security and therefore had little impact upon the sub-standard housing conditions of penniless workers. 5

1 The houses were built at Windang, Coniston, Keiraville and Unanderra. For a discussion of the quality of the trust homes see Central Illawarra Shire Housing Report, pp. 6 and 8; Central Illawarra Shire Minute Book, 1 April 1935. Complaints about delays in the provision of building materials may be found in the Illawarra Trades and Labor Council File, especially in the few remaining copies of the south coast relief workers' newspaper, Unity. See particularly Unity, 12 November 1936.

2 Central Illawarra Shire Minute Books, 13 May 1935.

3 Sydney Morning Herald, 18 July 1934.

4 Central Illawarra Shire Minute Books, 10 December 1935.

Improvement Act, passed in 1936, aimed to encourage home ownership and promote the clearance and rehabilitation of sub-standard housing. The procedures laid down in the act prevented it from having effect as an instrument of housing reform. The act endeavoured to promote the growth of terminating building societies, with the government acting as guarantor.¹

In Port Kembla the building society movement became an adjunct to local government housing policy. Shipp, as mayor, extolled the benefits of the societies in a weekly column headed 'Your Own Home' which he contributed to the Port Kembla Bulletin.² In June 1936, he called a meeting of ratepayers and set in motion Port Kembla's first building society. When it opened its doors as the Port Kembla Co-operative Building Society, Shipp was chairman of directors, and former AWU secretary, F.H. (Fred) Finch, now housing officer for the shire, was a co-director. Council involvement went further, however, than the participation of a few concerned individuals. At the outset clerical services were provided by the council staff and Finch, as part of his normal council duties, worked a half-day per week on society work.³ The effort brought almost immediate returns. Within twelve months fifty-nine homes were financed by the society and a further forty-nine were in the course of construction.⁴ By 1938 there were five societies at Port Kembla and by 1943 they had financed the building of 721 homes.⁵

Building societies, like the banks, catered for men with some capital. Housing loans were limited by law to ninety per cent of the society's valuation which was not to exceed £750. The maximum advance therefore required a cash outlay

¹NSW PD, 1936, Vol.151, p.46.
²See particularly, Port Kembla Bulletin, 22 December 1937.
³Interview with Mr F.H. Finch, 22 February 1972. See also Port Kembla Bulletin, 22 December 1937.
⁴Port Kembla Bulletin, 3 November 1937.
⁵Central Illawarra Shire Housing Report, p.8.
of £65 and weekly rentals of 16s 7d per week for twenty-eight years. If buyers could raise ten per cent of the land price, landowners and subdividers sometimes provided second mortgages. While this greater indebtedness naturally increased weekly repayments, the initial deposit was reduced to £40. Either amount was too great for the majority of workers in search of homes.

Lack of money was the main but not the only reason why a greater number of workers did not borrow from building societies or the banks. During his campaign in support of 'home ownership' Shipp discovered widespread resistance among the workers.\(^1\) To men who experienced mortgage foreclosure prior to Lang's Mortgage Moratorium Act further loan commitments were unthinkable.\(^2\) Many men were not sufficiently confident of continued employment to put down roots at Port Kembla. The Reverend W.J. Hobbin noted the same insecurity:

"A very real difficulty in the minds of many camp dwellers is the insecurity of their jobs. Daily they are haunted by the fear that the casual work or labouring jobs might 'cut out', throwing them back temporarily or permanently onto the unemployment scrapheap. As our readers will readily imagine, this sense of insecurity militates against home building.\(^3\)"

After 1936 it was clear that building societies touched only the fringe of the problem. It was obvious also that substantial improvement in housing conditions could only be effected by a vigorous government housing programme. The state authorities, however, moved slowly and local conditions deteriorated. The slow procedures of the Housing Improvement Board provoked much criticism. While the board deliberated, Illawarra councillors grew increasingly restless. They demanded that the state government co-operate with the council in erecting cottages of 'moderate value' (between £600 and £650) and 'cheap but efficiently designed' barracks

\(^1\) *Port Kembla Bulletin*, 22 December 1937.
\(^2\) Ibid., 19 January 1938.
\(^3\) *Church Standard*, 10 October 1937.
for single men.\(^1\) When this was rejected, a more specific and more comprehensive plan was recommended. The council asked to be empowered to resume crown land upon which homes for 'bona fide workmen' could be built.\(^2\) The government it was hoped would provide a £100,000 loan at normal interest rates.\(^3\)

The increasing council concern was in large part a response to growing demands among workers for better and cheaper housing. Organised agitation for housing reform had its origins in the anti-eviction campaign which gathered momentum in the early months of 1934. The influx after this date of workers, some with money in their pockets, made eviction a real alternative for landlords. In March workers' organisations complained that evictions were increasing and demanded that the state government should grant Wollongong workers 'a rent allowance to compensate landlords and property owners whose houses are occupied by dole workers... unable to pay rent'.\(^4\) Between March and July, anti-eviction leagues were established by the Unemployed Workers' Movement at Port Kembla, Fairy Meadow, Balgownie, Corrimal and Coledale. After a series of fourteen public meetings throughout the district, a Rent Allowance Housing Scheme and No Eviction Organisation was formed.\(^5\)

The housing reform movement became the vehicle for the social protest which had earlier found expression in the Unemployed Workers' Movement. At the head of the movement were men who had previously been officials in the Unemployed Workers' Movement and who were now active in organising Relief Workers' Associations. Especially prominent were R. (Bob) Allen, P. (Paddy) Malloy and P. (Pat) McHenry who employed the tactics of public protest they had learned during the free speech campaigns in 1931-2.

\(^1\)Central Illawarra Shire Minute Books, 5 July 1937.
\(^2\)Ibid., 27 September 1937.
\(^3\)Ibid.
\(^4\)South Coast Times, 16 March 1934.
\(^5\)Ibid., 13 July 1934.
Comparisons with the Unemployed Workers' Movement and the memory of earlier and sometimes violent 'anti-eviction' clashes between the unemployed organisation and the police worked against the new organisation and its protests were dismissed by most property owners as the 'agitation of the reds'.

To broaden the movement's basis attempts were made to win the support of influential middle class spokesmen. Little headway was made until 1936 when congestion at Port Kembla reached an intolerable level. There was an upsurge of interest in housing schemes after that date leading to the establishment of a 'homes for the people' movement. This was a loose alliance of unionists, militant activists and a handful of concerned middle class ratepayers. The movement prodded councils into improving the services provided for the unemployed camps and petitioned the state government to stabilise rents by re-introducing a Fair Rents Act. Its most significant achievement, however, was the formation, in late 1936, of a South Coast Housing Committee. The committee drew together groups agitating on the coalfields and at Port Kembla. It was successful also in attracting the support of a greater number of middle class reformers including the editor of the Illawarra Mercury, S.R. Musgrave, and the Reverend W.J. Hobbin. By so doing it improved its effectiveness as a pressure group. Sub-committees were appointed to investigate living conditions and to publicise the housing shortage. The findings were predictable enough. They criticised the government's inactivity, accused Stevens of 'playing off local governments against the building societies', which they denounced as the worst form of racketeering in New South Wales, profiting only 'the land


2South Coast Times, 6 September 1936.

shark and the banks'. The conclusion reached by the committee, though put more forcibly, was not dissimilar from that of local bodies. The government should make available cheap 'workmen's homes'.

In October 1937 the committee, with the support of the Illawarra Trades and Labor Council and local trade unions, summoned a public meeting to discuss the housing problem. The meeting called upon municipal and shire councils, churches, public bodies, political parties, trade unions and businessmen to support housing reform and resolved:

That we citizens of the South Coast, demand the immediate institution by the State Government of a housing scheme to cope with the need for homes by the people of this district.

In carrying out this scheme, we demand
1. That people living in Flinders Street Camp, Port Kembla be adequately provided with proper houses by the Government on land resumed for the purposes of such a housing scheme.
2. That the Government make provision for the purchase by the workers of homes under this housing scheme at a weekly rental commensurate with their weekly incomes.
3. That we call upon the Government to immediately re-enact the Fair Rents Bill and thus provide protection for the people against the present exorbitant rentals. Further, that the Government immediately institute an inquiry into the rentals now being charged on the South Coast.

The committee also consciously adopted a more moderate stance when criticising local governments and avoided open confrontation with them. When the Bulli Shire Council prosecuted workers for erecting shacks in the Coledale stockyards, the Illawarra Trades and Labor Council asked for leniency. It acknowledged

1Ibid.
2Ibid.
3Bulli Shire Minute Books, 18 October 1937.
4The 'stockyards' were a disused holding area for livestock being transported by rail to or from Sydney.
...that the council has definite responsibilities in connection with the building of houses and that it is not desirable that houses that do not conform to decent standards should be built. At the same time it is pointed out that it is instinctive for people to seek a shelter of their own and that such would be preferable to the over-crowding which the chronic housing shortage has brought about.  

Councils were asked to accept responsibility for providing workers with housing and urged to play a more active part in the housing reform movement. They were chided for prosecuting the 'victims of vicious circumstances'.

One point of agreement between local governments and the housing committee was the belief that BHP was to blame for much of the problem. Contrasting the worsening social conditions with the capital outlay on machines, the committee accused BHP of attempting to create 'a reserve army of labour that can be called on day and night'. The company in its view, had acted irresponsibly, attracting large numbers of people to the district but displaying 'greater interest in providing elaborate housing for machinery than for human beings'.

In common with housing reform movements throughout Australia the Wollongong group attracted clergymen and others who objected on religious grounds to poor housing and its consequences. It was from such men that the most acid denunciation of BHP came. Hobbin was the most outspoken of their number in Wollongong. He arrived in Bulli in 1936 after four years' work in the Methodist Inland Mission with his base at Mt Isa. To him the 'unplanned makeshift growth of dwellings at Port Kembla' contrasted badly with the orderly township at Mt Isa with its hundreds of two-storey homes.

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1 Bulli Shire Minute Books, 22 August 1938.
2 Ibid.
3 South Coast Times, 3 December 1937.
4 Illawarra Star, 3 August 1938.
built by the company in planned streets and equipped with
electricity, sewerage and running water.\(^1\) Reflecting on his
first impressions of Port Kembla, Hobbin wrote recently:

> Why the authorities, State and Local Government
> and the industrial magnates failed to anticipate
> the mushrooming of this ugly situation continued
> as a growing conundrum in my mind the more I
> reflected upon conditions in the mineral ridges
> of western Queensland. The more the authorities
> poured their fulsome appreciation and praise
> upon belching chimney stacks and rolling mills
to turn out miles of steel the more angry I
> became at so little attention being paid to the
dehumanising conditions in which manpower, so
> necessary to ensure that smoke and steel were
> forced to exist.\(^2\)

At the time anger prompted Hobbin to align himself with
the Legion of Christian Youth, a small group of churchmen
who advocated social reform. Headed by the Anglican Bishop
of Goulburn, E.H. Burgmann, the legion was made up of men
from the Methodist, Presbyterian and Anglican churches and its
programme included slum clearance, improved treatment for
juvenile delinquents and the preservation of world peace.
Its members supported the South Coast Housing Committee by
speaking at public meetings and by assisting with research
projects.\(^3\) In September 1937 Hobbin established a South
Coast Branch of the legion in Wollongong. Like its parent
body the branch was composed of churchmen, especially from the
Salvation Army, aided by a handful of young church followers.\(^4\)

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\(^1\) For a discussion of company-housing at Mt Isa see Geoffrey

\(^2\) Letter to the author from Reverend W.J. Hobbin, dated

\(^3\) The Legion, according to Reverend Hobbin, never exceeded ten
in number and included, in addition to Bishop Burgmann and
Hobbin, the following: A. Barkeel (a Sydney solicitor),
A.J. Dalziel (later private secretary to H.V. Evatt),
W. Matthews (registrar at Sydney Teachers College), N. Bagnall
(a student for the Methodist ministry from Brisbane).

\(^4\) The office-holders of the South Coast Branch were as
follows: President, R. Barton (Woonona); secretary, W.J. Hobbin
(Bulli); committee, W. Stocks, Adjutant Packer, Captain
Townsend, Miss J. Thomas, G. Lawler, F. Ellis, C. Hutchinson.
*Illawarra Mercury*, 17 September 1937.
Hobbin launched an all out attack on BHP. In an article which he contributed to the Church Standard headed 'Humanity Crucified' he wrote:

The company [BHP]...has been interested in homes - that is, their own homes, with chromium-plated kitchens and liquor bars. These are situated on a hill which has been given a very significant name GREEN HILL. From this hill one is able to look down on the camps where dwell the toilers. Long ago humanity, in the Person of Christ, was hung on a hill. Today he is certainly crucified over and over again in the awful conditions in which hundreds of human beings were forced to live on the South Coast of New South Wales.¹

There was an immediate government response to Hobbin's allegations. Spooner and H.M. Hawkins, Minister of Social Services, who had previously rejected invitations from the South Coast Housing Committee to examine housing conditions in the district, made a hurried and unheralded visit to Port Kembla. In practical terms, the result was an offer by the government to provide temporary barracks for single men and three-roomed cottages for families.² Most workers, however, were dissatisfied with Spooner's proposal and described it as a 'move from camps to huts'.³ The majority of Central Illawarra Shire councillors were similarly displeased. The indefatigible Shipp denounced the scheme: 'Port Kembla and district do not want slum areas and unless this question [sic] be opposed we will have in our midst another steeltown only of greater magnitude.⁴

Assurances from the government that Spoonerville, as the settlement was named, was a temporary expedient appeased some opposition. In the event reservations as to the quality of the housing were well grounded. Constructed with half-canvas,

¹Church Standard, 10 September 1937.
³Illawarra Star, 11 October 1937.
⁴Port Kembla Bulletin, 22 December 1937. 'Steeltown' was the name given to the collection of shacks and tents which had been erected close to the steelworks.
Housing at Port Kembla, 1943.

Housing on the beachfront near Port Kembla, 1943.

Spoonerville 'cottages', 1943.

Shire of Central Illawarra Housing Report, 1943.
half-timber walls, the cottages were of makeshift design. In the bedrooms, canvas blinds, which did service for glass windows, prevented adequate ventilation on wet days, and bathrooms were not provided. The barracks for single men were even more rudimentary. Each barrack was divided into cubicles, six feet six inches by five feet, totally devoid of storage space for clothes or food. Moreover, as the partitions separating the cubicles did not reach the ceiling there were no safeguards against theft and privacy was almost non-existent.° Condemnation of the completed buildings was universal. Shipp made a plea for their removal and single men in the Flinders Street camp refused to move into the barracks despite threats by Spooner to turn them out of their camps. The opening of the new settlement was delayed for four months until improvements were made. Bathrooms were added to the cottages although bathwater still had to be carried from the open fireplace. Cubicles in the barracks were made more private.

These minor improvements made the accommodation more acceptable to some of the campers, but many remained reluctant to enter Spoonerville. In the long-run, however, they were forced to lower their expectations and make the best of what was offered them. With some improvisation families found that they could make the huts tolerably comfortable. It was possible by lining the walls with old sacks and then covering them with a layer of brown paper to retain some warmth. The huts, however, were constructed on a hillside and those on the higher slopes were exposed to cold coastal winds. Consequently, wherever possible families sought the huts on the more protected lower slopes. By July 1939, however, Spoonerville's sixty-five cottages and twenty barracks were occupied.

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1 Illawarra Star, 12 January 1939, 22 June 1939, 4 July 1939.
2 Interview with Mrs J. McKenzie, 8 June 1973.
3 Illawarra Star, 4 July 1939.
The state government's decision to provide temporary accommodation at Port Kembla may be counted the only immediate achievement of the housing reformers. It also marks the beginning of the disintegration of the South Coast Housing Committee. After 1938 middle class supporters tended to fall away. S.R. Musgrave, the editor of the Illawarra Mercury, summarised their thinking when he declared that more would be gained by direct appeals to state and local governments without political or ideological overtones. In his view, Spoonerville was proof that the government was now aware of Port Kembla's special problems and that further agitation was not needed. 1

Support from the camp dwellers also declined. They were often as suspicious of the housing reformers as they were of local government authorities. Both, in different ways, represented a threat to the only security campers felt themselves to possess. Moreover, the horrors of Spoonerville intensified this suspicion. As a consequence public meetings called by the South Coast Housing Committee during 1938 and 1939 were fortunate to attract an audience of forty. 2 Nevertheless, labour leaders continued to denounce the housing shortage. In Hobbin's view Spoonerville would 'ever remain as a monument to the socially biased minds of those responsible for the scheme'. 3

The housing reform movement, however, should not be judged a failure. In the first place, the combined effect of the housing reform movements throughout Australia did force governments to launch official enquiries and establish public

1 Illawarra Mercury, 4 March 1939.
2 Interviews with Reverend W.J. Hobbin, 19 February 1973; Mr F.H. Finch, Housing Officer for the Shire of Central Illawarra, 16 February 1973. Evidence of the camp dwellers' distrust of the housing reformers may be found in Illawarra Star, 6 July 1938.
housing authorities. Moreover, the dominantly trade union nature of the Wollongong movement reveals the extent to which continued deprivation sharpened working class consciousness. Opposition to the housing committee indicates the readiness with which most middle class spokesmen rationalised the rejection of legitimate social grievances by crying 'communism'. The fact that many of the housing reformers were committed also to the 'anti-war' cause made this labelling seem more plausible to such men. Hobbin writes of the communist participation in the housing reform and peace movements.

The committees [for housing and against war] were not used by them [the communists] even though our opposition used all sorts of smear tactics including their favourite claim that everyone who supported either of these goals was an obvious red. 3

Spooneville, however, was the full extent of government housing aid at Port Kembla and viewpoints expressed by government officials reveal a limited grasp of the district's problems. Speaking of Port Kembla and New South Wales industrial areas more generally, Spooner offered an explanation for their unhealthy state:

In the past towns have been thrown together in a hurry when an industry was established and there was no certainty as to its permanence. These conditions have remained and a second generation or third generation has accepted them as normal. 4

As an explanation for the origin and continued existence of

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1 Public housing authorities were formed in Victoria (1938), New South Wales (1942), Queensland (1945), Western Australia (1947). For a discussion of the formation of the housing authorities see M.A. Jones, Housing and Poverty in Australia (Melbourne, 1972), especially pp.1-14. The New South Wales government also launched an enquiry into rents. See Illawarra Mercury, 16, 23 June 1939, for a report of the government's investigation in Wollongong.

2 See Chapter Seven, pp.316-32.


4 Sydney Morning Herald, 15 August 1938.
most Australian slum areas, Spooner's statement was accurate enough. Port Kembla was not, however, an old industrial or residential area and little effort was made by the New South Wales government to avoid the earlier mistakes now diagnosed by Spooner. He proposed to rationalise local government boundaries so as to eliminate overlapping functions and reduce administration costs. As a result he hoped more money could be directed to improving social amenities. Spooner foreshadowed such a move when he described the population growth at Port Kembla and the smaller northern villages as merging 'into one large settlement that should lend itself admirably to group treatment of communal services'.

In early 1939 he put forward a South Coast Development Plan. The plan aimed 'to improve local government strength and stability on the upper south coast' and to create separate authorities for the coalfields, the Wollongong-Port Kembla industrial area and for the dairying districts to the south.

He proposed a city of Wollongong to extend as far north as Corrimal and to the south of Port Kembla with an immediate population of 35,000. The remaining coalmining communities north as far as Waterfall and the southern dairying district were to be constituted separate shires.

Spooner's plan reduced the number of local government areas from four to three and avoided the overlapping of rural and industrial interests which existed in Central Illawarra. Unfortunately it foundered on parochial jealousies. Port Kembla industrialists were firmly against amalgamation. To them Port Kembla was 'the goose that lays the golden egg' and they did not wish the industrial area 'fall into the Wollongong basket. They countered Spooner's recommendations by proposing that Port Kembla should itself constitute a municipality or shire. This proposal reflected the old

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1 Ibid.
2 Wollongong Advance, 2 March 1939.
3 Ibid.
4 Illawarra Star, 20 April 1939.
grievance that Port Kembla, which paid the greater part of Central Illawarra rates, was represented by only three councillors. When asked to vote on Spooner's proposed amalgamation, Port Kembla ratepayers were almost unanimous in rejecting the scheme. The Bulli Shire Council raised no objections since it stood to gain new rate revenues by the inclusion of Mt Keira and Mt Kembla collieries within its boundaries. It sought, nevertheless, to extend its southern boundaries so as to obtain the townships of Corrimal and Bellambi. The Northern Illawarra Council predictably enough, since the projected amalgamation would throw it out of existence, thought the changes 'too drastic' and summoned a protest meeting. Wollongong aldermen were divided in their response. Most were amenable but some, such as R.F.X. Connor, predicted that local taxation would rise rapidly. He claimed that Bulli was to gain all the revenue from the collieries, while Wollongong would be asked to bear the expense of Port Kembla. In the event Spooner rejected the attempts of industrialists to declare Port Kembla a municipality, but at the cost of his amalgamation project.

The housing problem which has been outlined is probably as good an indicator of living standards as levels of employment and wage rates. The threefold increase in rents ensured that the average workingman remained very close to the subsistence level at a time when he was surrounded by visible evidence of the increase in the wealth of the employers. To most wage earners this must have felt much like a decline in living standards. It seemed that the workers' share in the

1 Seventy-nine per cent of those who voted rejected the scheme. A total of 2,788 votes were cast against the proposal, 468 were in favour and 127 informal votes were recorded. Illawarra Star, 4 July 1939.
2 Illawarra Mercury, 10 March 1939.
3 Ibid.
'Port Kembla Boom' was 'rapidly increasing prices, increased rents, bad working conditions, hovels (such as Flinders Street) and everything to make life a burden'. After a period of depression in which the workers felt that they had borne a disproportionate share of the burden, this seemed like a travesty of a promised land.

Unemployment continued to be a fact of life although its incidence was much debated. The monthly registration figures at state labour exchanges only provide a rough index of unemployment. There was no permanent downward trend in the number of men registered as unemployed in the Wollongong district before May 1934. After this date the figure fell from 3,400 to 942 in 1939. Some idea of the experience of those men who did not readily find a permanent job may be gleaned from the government statistician's unemployment survey undertaken late in 1936 among relief workers. The survey reveals that during the three years after 1933 the average work history of 2,598 men included twenty-nine months of unemployment. For 3.7 months of this time no income was received, twenty-one and a half months was spent on relief work and a further 3.7 months on food relief. Of the seven months in employment less than half-a-month was spent on municipal relief works, one month working on government unemployed schemes and five and a half months working for a private employer.

Contemporaries, however, especially those who wished to close the camps frequently denied the existence of 'genuine local unemployment'. It was a convenient if specious argument to claim as Shipp did, that as, 'not one' camper was unemployed, all should be evicted. The 1938 camp census

1 Steel & Metal Worker, 14 January 1937.


3 Ibid., pp. 41-8. The questionnaire reached a sample of ninety per cent.

4 Ibid.

5 Illawarra Mercury, 24 December 1937.
conducted by the Central Illawarra Shire set the number of unemployed residing in temporary camps at forty. ¹
Metropolitan newspapers likewise claimed that there were no unemployed at Port Kembla. The Sydney Morning Herald, under the headline 'Port Kembla Boom, No Employable now Unemployed', wrote that great prosperity prevailed and that not one 'employable' unemployed could be found in the town. Workers and trade union officials nevertheless estimated unemployment at between 1,000 and 1,500 and pointed to queues of as many as 700 men looking for work daily 'on the hill' at the steelworks.²

The argument turned mainly upon the definition of terms. Local government officials considered part-time relief workers as 'in employment'.³ Moreover, Central Illawarra councillors interpreted the expression 'Port Kembla residents' literally and narrowly to suit their purposes. Men who camped on the outskirts of the shire, or who slept near the steelworks during the week and returned to their homes at the weekend, were discounted as not genuine residents. Yet the council later conceded that hundreds of casual labourers drifted into the town in search of construction work at the steelworks.⁴ The number of 'floating' unemployed remained constant at between 700 to 1,000 although the men involved varied. As construction work slowed after 1938, the inflow of unskilled men continued. Nevertheless, large scale dismissals of construction workers was common, as many as 1,400 men being dismissed at once.⁵

In contrast with the high degree of unemployment experienced by unskilled construction workers, the situation of coalminers improved markedly. Wollongong Labour exchange

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² Steel & Metal Worker, 14 January 1937.
³ Central Illawarra Shire Minute Books, 6 January 1937.
⁴ Sydney Morning Herald, 12 January 1938.
⁵ Wollongong Advance, 25 May 1939, 1 June 1939; Steel & Metal Worker, 14 January 1937.
figures demonstrate the position. Of the 747 adult males registered, thirty-eight or less than five per cent were coalminers.\textsuperscript{1} Undoubtedly this does not reflect the full extent of unemployment among coalminers, as many mine-workers did not seek re-employment at the Labour Exchange. In addition, others had abandoned their calling during the depression years. This was particularly true of youths trained in the coal industry and dismissed when they reached twenty-one years of age, if not earlier. By 1937 they were found in disproportionate numbers among the unskilled workers at the steelworks. Employers at Port Kembla, as elsewhere throughout Australia, complained of a shortage of skilled labour. They claimed that the high wages paid to unskilled labourers deterred youths from entering apprenticeships.\textsuperscript{2} Yet Wollongong miners at least had this alternative. Youths on the northern New South Wales coalfield were not so fortunate, and by 1940 close to 2,000 of them were out of work.\textsuperscript{3}

The conditions and employment of relief workers did, however, improve throughout the period. At first emergency relief work was available only to men eligible for food relief, but the restrictions were gradually reduced. After March 1935 the allocation of work was changed from a daily to a weekly basis; and the permissible income clause was suspended.\textsuperscript{4} At one end of the scale single men worked one week in five while at the other a married man with four or more children worked four weeks out of five.\textsuperscript{5} The change

\textsuperscript{1}Report of the Royal Commission on Compulsory Retirement of Employees in Coal and Oil Shale Mines in New South Wales (Sydney, 1941), pp.55-6.

\textsuperscript{2}Illawarra Star, 7 September 1939.

\textsuperscript{3}Report of the Royal Commission inquiring into the Question of the Compulsory Retirement of Employees in Coal and Oil Shale Mines, p.56.

\textsuperscript{4}Suspended in March 1935, the permissible income clause was re-imposed in October because of a large increase in applications for work.

\textsuperscript{5}Report upon Unemployment in the State of New South Wales, pp.24-5.
was made principally to assist local bodies to organise their relief works more efficiently, but it also helped improve relations between the relief workers and their employers. It had been hard for men to build up any enthusiasm for a job at which they might work for a couple of days, and for which, by trade union standards, they were grossly underpaid. In 1936, however, it became possible for local bodies to employ relief workers on a full-time basis at trade union rates. The scheme was introduced by the Minister for Public Works, E.S. Spooner, and offered special grants to local councils for unemployment relief projects, provided they borrowed equivalent sums. In this way, men were put to work at better than makework projects building bridges, culverts and constructing much needed drainage channels. Many of these schemes, such as the construction of the Lake Illawarra bridge which linked the industrial area of Port Kembla with Shellharbour and opened up new and cheaper land for housing development, directly benefited workers.¹

The 'Spooner scheme' as the new relief programme was labelled, depended to a considerable extent for its continued existence upon Spooner's authorisation. He not only sanctioned local government relief projects but also, as Minister for Local Government, approved their applications to borrow the capital needed to finance them. For this reason the faction-fighting which developed within the United Australia Party - Country Party Coalition after 1938 is of particular significance. The joint administration of local government and public works enabled Spooner, an ambitious accountant, to gain virtually complete control of the expenditure of relief money and an effective power base from which he could assert his claims for leadership of the UAP. Both Stevens and M. Bruxner, the Country Party leader, were anxious to curb his growing power, if not to be rid of him. A brief downturn in the economy in 1938 pushed unemployment upward and provided the occasion Stevens and Bruxner wanted. They supported the argument of the treasury that a deficit

¹South Coast Times, 8 April 1938.
could only be avoided if government expenditure on public works was cut drastically. Spooner countered with demands for increased government relief work, but his views were ultimately rejected by the cabinet. The treasury's victory meant the repudiation, or at least the postponement, of approved works at Port Kembla and elsewhere. The fall in relief work expenditure coincided with a lull in construction work at the steelworks, and the number of unemployed at Port Kembla rose rapidly.

Although the recession proved temporary, it did not seem so at the time and the memories of the previous ten years lent urgency to the demands of both trade unions and local bodies. In July 1939, after repeated requests for assistance had failed, the Central Illawarra Shire Council moved:

That in view of the large number of unemployed in the District that representations be made to the Premier to have reviewed in full, the qualifications necessary for employment to be obtained under Government Relief Schemes and that a major National work be commenced immediately in this area.

Some appeals for work were put more forcefully. Shipp condemned both the decline of unemployment relief and the lack of government housing assistance and contrasted both with increased government expenditure on defence.

An Australian is at least entitled to a feed and a decent home. The Government can find millions of pounds to blow men to pieces surely to God they can find a few thousand to assist those who are without a home...

Full employment, however, came only with the outbreak of war in September 1939.

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1 The material for this paragraph was drawn from Don Aitkin, The Colonel: A Political Biography of Sir Michael Bruxner (Canberra, 1969), pp.226-36.

2 Central Illawarra Shire Minute Books, 31 July 1939.

3 Port Kembla Bulletin, 9 November 1938.
The long experience of insecurity manifested itself in various ways. For some, as noted earlier, it produced a reluctance to accept home ownership. Others hoarded their savings in pillow cases and obscure hiding places rather than place their trust in banks. All feared loss of work whether by dismissal or sickness or misadventure. A woman who provided for her husband and child through three years of unemployment by working as a domestic servant in Sydney returning monthly to their bush shack has described this fear:

I got up one morning early. I thought it's time for Jock to go to work. Got him up and down he went to catch the bus. His father had the milk run. He was delivering the milk and his Dad called out, 'Is that you Jock? What are you doing here. It's only three o'clock in the morning you've got two hours to wait.' In case he would lose work in the morning you went to bed with [this thought] on your mind: hope I don't sleep in in the morning because it's the day's wages.

The coalmining villages were, however, saved from the virtual extinction which befell similar communities on the northern New South Wales coalfields by the development at Port Kembla. In the first place, increased steel production required more coal and, while this demand was at first satisfied by BHP collieries, orders eventually spilled over to other mines and helped regenerate the stagnant mining villages. Secondly, steelworkers and their families moved northwards as far as Helensburgh in search of accommodation. The combined effect was to promote changes in the character of the coalmining communities. The most obvious was a gradual breakdown in the isolation and the almost exclusively mining nature of the villages. This trend was accelerated by a tendency for fewer miners to work at the colliery around which their village had grown. This had profound effects on the lives of those involved. For a great number of miners travelling became a way of life. A Coledale Miner working

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1 Interview with Mrs Jean McQuire, 15 January 1973.

2 For a description of poverty on the northern coalfield see Smith's Weekly, 26 November 1938.
'dog-watch' at Wongawilli left home at 9.50 a.m. to start work at 2.30 p.m. After a twelve mile and forty-five minute train journey to Wollongong, he waited several hours for a bus to take him the remainder of the journey. The return journey was even more protracted since the 11.40 p.m. train travelled only as far as Thirroul, leaving the miner a further two miles to trudge home. As the numbers of men working at Wongawilli grew, the miners hired buses and, at an individual cost of 25s per fortnight, halved their travelling-time. The steelworkers were also commuters, most travelling to work by train.¹

The need to commute and its cost limited social life. For most, playing cards or listening to a neighbour's wireless was the normal way of spending an evening. Moreover, the rapid growth of population strained existing recreational facilities. In common with most poor communities Wollongong workers sought in the proxy life of the silver screen the excitement that life failed to provide. At Port Kembla, it was almost impossible despite additional improvised seating to obtain picture theatre tickets after 7 p.m. each evening.² Sometimes, as the last straw, the hotels ran out of beer.³ Playing fields were needed and union leaders canvassed employer's support for their provision. The latter, however, were not anxious to commit themselves. 'If what they [the workers] have in mind', commented the general manager of BHP, 'is not outrageous we may be able to help a little.'⁴ The surf remained a continued attraction and surf clubs which had foundered for lack of patronage during the early 1930s revived and new ones were started.

¹This paragraph is based on an account of a Wongawilli miners' day in Smith's Weekly, 6 August 1938, and on interviews with several coalminers and steelworkers. Especially useful was an interview with Mr J. McQuire, 2 February 1973. For a discussion on work-travel by the steelworkers see J.A. Merritt, op.cit., p.230.

²Sydney Morning Herald, 12 January 1938.

³Illawarra Trades and Labor Council File, 19 August 1939.

⁴AIS Managing Director's Business Sheets, BHP Archives File, No.916-30, 15 August 1939.
Many observers accepted the view that BHP had converted Port Kembla and Wollongong from 'sleepy country hamlets' into 'thriving cities'. Some, as noted earlier, stopped to count the social cost as measured by the housing shortage and by deteriorating living conditions. Others denounced drunkenness and gambling as social evils which had sprung up with the coming of the industrial workers to Port Kembla. The charges were commonly levelled at the unskilled workers and casual labourers. It was assumed by the men of property who commonly made such assertions that as men often in steady employment lived in deplorable shacks and not in proper housing they must dissipate their wages in excessive drinking or gambling.

Naturally there was some truth in the gambling charge. Illegal off-course or SP (starting price) betting grew in the 1920s, as possession of radio sets became more common. Its appeal was principally to the workers who could not afford to attend the race course. Customarily the billiard room and barber shop were fronts for SP bookmakers. But in the mid-1930s the bookmakers became more brazen, and at Wollongong and Port Kembla 'stands' were set up at the rear of hotels. Smith's Weekly has described SP organisation at a Port Kembla hotel:

Like the others, [hotels] the Commercial Hotel in Wentworth Street, Kembla - the main street of the new steel city - is being remodelled, and in the courtyard, fortuitously provided by the new architecture, there was a betting ring on Saturday reminiscent of Royal Randwick itself.

A crowd of approximately 500 milled on the concrete square in the anxious manner of punters on the course, but what mattered more was that they had up-to-the-second information.

Within a small room, opening by window on to the courtyard, was a bookmaker with the broad wager book of the type used by registered

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1 Smith's Weekly, 27 November 1937.

2 The first Australian radio programme was broadcast on 23 November 1923.

3 Smith's Weekly, 9 October 1937.
bookmakers at Randwick. Assisting him were four clerks, and as fast as they could work the 'steelies' and others were set for anything from sixpence to a 'fiver'.

The local hotel remained the centre of social life for most workers and also the focal point of other forms of gambling. On the Sunday mornings of pay-week the courtyards of hotels on the coalfield echoed to the noisy banter of miners placing side-bets on quoits contests. It was common also for whippet races to be arranged at and conducted near the local hotel, although after the mid-1930s these events were superseded by greyhound racing conducted by official clubs. By engaging in such escapist pleasures as petty gambling, drinking and cinema-going workers were seeking to bring some relief to an otherwise dismal existence.

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1 Ibid.

2 The Wollongong Greyhound Racing Club held its first meeting in January 1934. See Illawarra Mercury, 5 January 1934.
The period of economic recovery after 1934 witnessed the emergence of a more militant trade union movement. Unionists wanted compensation for hardships suffered and guarantees against further depression. To achieve these objectives it was first necessary to rebuild the labour movement especially at Port Kembla where trade unions had almost disappeared during the depression years. In 1934, there were formidable obstacles in the way of such reorganisation. Unemployment, although diminishing, continued to place limits on union action. The social cohesion which fortified unionism on the coalfields developed only slowly at Port Kembla. Yet ultimately the contrast between industrial expansion and the continued deterioration of living and working conditions gave added weight to the arguments of those who urged more militant union tactics. The militants won their first victory on the coalfields.

Employment at southern collieries improved continuously after 1933. The deterioration of working conditions below ground which took place during the depression, however, continued unchecked for much of the 1930s. The darg had been lifted or abandoned at most pits. At all mines workers saw no alternative to accepting sub-standard conditions as an inevitable part of the crisis in the coal industry. Low profits made employers cautious of any expenditure not directly related to increased production. Colliery proprietors acknowledged a need for improvements but claimed in evidence before the Davidson Commission

...that most of the collieries in the South Coast are not in a financial position to lavish money on things that they would like to do, perhaps, for the benefit of the workers in the industry. They have been through depression periods and other hard periods, until to-day there is sufficient trade available. We find ourselves in a position to-day that we are not getting proper working time from our collieries and thus we have not yet got the necessary money
The statement reveals two aspects of the policy adopted by the employers. The first was an attempt to relate minimum standards for working conditions to the current profits of the coal industry. The second was an endeavour to shift the area of dispute between workers and employers away from questions of conditions or safety to those of industrial relations. Both arguments were ultimately rejected by Judge Drake-Brockman, in 1938, as irrelevant. Before his judgment was delivered however these tactics were regarded as legitimate by all southern colliery owners. The claims of miners for improved conditions were rejected as too costly or, in cases where safety measures involved additional payments, the matter was treated as one concerning wage rates which could be held up indefinitely. This is not to say that all colliery proprietors stood resolutely against all or any safety reforms in mining practice but that, wherever possible, they used temporising tactics to put off the spending of money on permanent improvements.

While the owners fought for time, conditions worsened as maintenance was neglected. In some mines the air-flow in underground workings diminished, timbering standards declined and dust levels rose. Leakages of air resulted in too weak a supply of air reaching the work-face. The 1938-9 Royal Commission singled out South Clifton colliery for particular criticism. At this mine two-thirds of the air intake was lost within half a mile of the pit-top. In the view of the Commission the state of the colliery was deplorable:

...There is no reasonably safe way of access to the mine, coal dust from the screens enters the intake tunnel in large quantities through a doorway. The roof of the tunnel, for approximately 50 yards from the entrance, is

only about four feet six inches high, and
the men, after negotiating this impediment,
walk a considerable distance in a travelling
way of a reasonable height with intervals of
low roof, before proceeding to the working
place by means of roadways with roofs lower
than the entrance tunnel. This accumulation
of improprieties and difficulties warrants every
pressure being brought to bear on the
proprietors to remodel the working conditions. 1

The majority of small mines (defined by the Royal Commission
as those employing fewer than twenty men) continued to use
furnace rather than fan ventilation. Since the tendency was
for the furnace to dwindle during the latter stages of a
shift, this method led to a gradual reduction of the air
current. The commission also condemned the trend towards
the use of cheaper brattice doorways rather than wooden stops
to prevent dangerous rushes of air. 2

The greatest danger arose from inadequate timbering.
Most deaths in New South Wales mines were caused by roof-falls.
Of the 113 men killed in New South Wales coalfields in the
period between 1928 and 1939, eighty-seven were traceable to
this source. 3 Similarly, 237 of the 567 non-fatal underground
accidents were attributed by the Commission to roof falls. 4
Faulty timbering was not only the most dangerous shortcoming
of mining practice in the 1930s, it was also the most
contentious. The erection of props involved the question of
additional payments. Disputes about timbering were
therefore commonplace and their pattern was a familiar one
in coalmining where 'on the spot' negotiations between
worker and employer were more frequent than in most other
industries.

The decision to put in props lay in the last resort with
the management. If a miner, in the interests of his own
safety, erected props without the agreement of a deputy he

1Report of the Royal Commission on Safety and Health of
2Ibid.
3Ibid., p.56.
4Ibid.
might be refused payment for the job. In these circumstances mine-safety often became a matter of calculated bluff on both sides. A miner would ask permission to erect props and, when refused, threaten to do so regardless of whether or not he was paid for the task. He thus established the dispute as one about safety and not one about payments. These tactics were sometimes successful since they placed the owner in the position of appearing to refuse adequate safety precautions, and of possibly endangering life. However, few miners in the 1930s were prepared to challenge a deputy whose decisions were endorsed by the manager. Yet the reluctance of employers to authorise the closer setting of props near the coal-face was cited by the Royal Commission as being responsible for most falls. After an accident underground in which a miner was killed, a check-inspector reported as follows:

At the place where the fall occurred the roof was timbered by means of props and raps on each side of the roadway. The stone came away between the props. If slab timber had been set across the roadway the fall would not have taken place. Generally, the roof in this section of the mine has been of a hard nature but due to the close proximity of pillar extraction a change had taken place in the nature of the roof. The management should have noticed and altered the system of timbering.¹

The same check inspector argued that the majority if not all, fatal accidents resulted from the failure of the employers to authorise the placing of slabs.²

The incidence of miners' silicosis was another constant grievance among southern miners. They sought to have the complaint recognised as a 'compensatable' disease. Coalminers suffering from diseases caused by inhaling dust could apply to the Pneumoconiosis Medical Board to be examined for compensation. In the twelve years between 1926 and 1939, according to figures presented by southern miners' officials, 239 miners applied. During the same period forty-five of

¹Davidson Commission, evidence of A.T.R. Emery (district check-inspector, southern district), 20 September 1938, p.43.
²Ibid.
these miners died from the disease, while 147 on being rejected continued to work despite the affliction. Only forty-seven received compensation. Appeals to the Pneumoconiosis Board were protracted affairs and the litigation expensive for the union which acted on behalf of its members. Workmen suffering some degree of disability but who were not totally incapacitated presented an equally serious problem. Since the owners were not required by law to provide light work for men certified as partially affected by dust, many miners were forced to return to their previous jobs and thereby forfeited their right to compensation. Frequently they found themselves incapable of work after only a short period. Low rates of compensation and lack of provisions necessary to make good the loss of income between accident and award were further legitimate grievances. Southern miners urged the government to improve the financial plight of injured or compensated miners but met with little success.

As the demand for coal increased in the late 1930s underground workings were pushed out into new coal deposits at greater distance from the surface. This placed increased strains upon ventilation systems and aggravated existing evils as well as creating new ones. Few southern collieries, for example, provided a transport system for men working underground. By the mid-1930s it was common for a miner to walk as much as three miles from the pit-mouth to the work-face laden with powder tin, picks, a drill, water bottle and 'tucker tin'. The return journey often involved a steep climb to the surface. At Wongawilli colliery the long underground walk to the pit-face was preceded by a one mile climb from the bathrooms up a steep hill, whose gradients reached one-in-three, to the pit-top. In the summer months men reached the mine entrance covered in sweat, or as one

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1 Ibid., evidence of C. Nelson, 14 September 1938, p.17.
2 Record Book, 17 September 1934.
3 See Smith's Weekly, 5 August 1938.
miner described it, 'like grease'. The winter increased
...the chances of a man contracting sickness
through going up there and landing at the pit
top in wet clothes...and working his shift in
wet clothes. There is no provision at the
pit top, [for shelter] only a shed - I have
measured it - anything from 27 to 30 feet by
about 12 feet, to house 300 men at the pit top
in the morning, and it is not nearly enough.
The men are sitting around under stones and
busily trying to get some protection from the
element.

Coming, as it often did, after a two-hour journey by train
and on foot, the climb up the hill added to the miners' general
state of fatigue. According to medical testimony a man in
this state was more liable to lung disorders. Moreover,
union officials claimed that the climb up the hill was at the
back of most stoppages at the pit and the cause of much
absenteeism. Men, they declared, rather than climb the hill
'have come home and lost shifts - they have been that tired
when they got there that they did not care whether they went
to work'.

The high incidence of lung disorders among southern
miners was aggravated also by the ageing of the work force.
A sample taken from a number of southern collieries in 1938
indicates that 30.59 per cent of all mine employees were over
fifty years of age and 8.2 per cent were over sixty years of
age. In the uncertain 1930s 'retirement' was a luxury which
few miners could afford. It was alleged that one screen-
worker was still on the job at the ripe old age of 104.
For employees working underground where the risk of disease
was greatest the proportion of 'aged' workers was only
slightly lower. Twenty-five per cent of all underground
workers were more than fifty years of age. These average

1Davidson Commission, evidence of M.M. Fitzgibbons,
6 December 1938, p.350.
2Ibid., evidence of S. Platts, 2 December 1938, p.340.
3Ibid., p.177.  G.M. Hindmarsh later gave evidence of ten men
still working at Mt Keira colliery who were all over 80 years
of age. Most of them had worked at the same pit for fifty
or sixty years. Ibid., 2 February 1939, p.681.
4Ibid.
figures, presented in the Royal Commission's report probably understated the general position. They were based on figures supplied by the larger mines which, when re-employing workers after 1934, favoured experienced younger men. In the smaller mines the percentage of 'aged' miners, in some instances, reached seventy-five per cent.¹

Mine owners attributed this 'ageing' to the miner's seniority rule. This was a specious argument, however, for while colliery proprietors generally preferred to employ younger men, they had at the same time dismissed youths as they became eligible for adult wage rates. Whatever the reasons, the result was a work-force which had been exposed to mining diseases for several decades. Perhaps the worst example pointed to by medical experts was that nearly all miners aged more than fifty years suffered from emphysema.²

The southern coal proprietors proved reluctant to engage in joint discussions on questions of safety and health. In 1925 the establishment and maintenance of rescue stations had been made mandatory in each mining district. Each colliery proprietor was required to establish a telephone link with this central rescue station and to maintain rescue equipment at each pit. Yet despite the persistent dangers associated with mining, safety consciousness amongst employers and employees alike began only slowly in the southern district. Some owners formed pit-safety committees but they were exceptional. During 1936 and 1937 the southern colliery proprietors rejected requests by the miners for a district safety committee.³ When the Royal Commission later recommended the establishment of a similar body, the owners equivocated. They eventually suggested that the membership of any safety committee should be confined to colliery managers who alone possessed the necessary technical competence. The proprietors conceded that such a committee

¹Ibid., evidence of G.M. Hindmarsh, 1 February 1939, p.664.
²Report of the Royal Commission on Safety and Health of Workers in Coal Mines, p.175.
³Davidson Commission, evidence p.422.
would accept suggestions from the miners. The special problems confronting southern miners were, however, partially recognised by the appointment of their president, F. (Fred) Lowden, as a member of the Royal Commission. Lowden's special knowledge of the dust problem and of safety issues more generally, together with his deep understanding of compensation law, ensured a hearing for the special grievances of southern miners.

It is against this background of worsening conditions that unionists were compelled to reconsider their position. MMM activists now found a more receptive audience for their policy of direct action. Deplorable conditions in the mines added point to their criticisms of federation policy. They condemned union leaders for their passivity, for their failure to listen to rank and file demands and for accepting the conditions imposed by an industry in crisis. By 1934 some of these militants had won lodge offices and were able to launch a successful campaign for the election of their candidates to the executive of the Miners' Federation. In January 1934 southern district votes helped W. (Bill) Orr, chairman of the western district MMM, to defeat A. (Arthur) Teece for the general secretarship of the Federation. Six months later after the death of D. (Don) Rees, the federation's president, the southern district supported the successful candidate, C. (Charlie) Nelson who had partnered Orr in the western district MMM.

Support for the movement's candidates sprang from a growing belief that the old leadership had failed and from a parochial distrust of another northern-based federal executive which had existed from the foundation of the federation in 1916. There was, however, no comparable change of

1 Ibid., p.423.
2 Labor Daily, 30 January 1934. Of the 2032 votes cast in the southern district Orr received 788 and Teece 573.
3 Sydney Morning Herald, 24 August 1934.
4 The desire to replace the northern executive was stressed by most miners interviewed on this point.
leadership in the southern district. The initiative nevertheless remained with the communists, Orr and Nelson, and their supporters. Moreover, Lowden was no moderate. His genuine concern at the worsening conditions in the mines was shown by his determined efforts on behalf of compensated or sick miners, and by his persistent attempts to publicise the problem of dust in southern mines. His views on these topics brought him into broad sympathy with the communists and he eventually joined the Communist Party.

Criticism by militants had not been confined to the old leadership. Men who had experienced lengthy periods of unemployment attributed the decline in working conditions to the 'job consciousness', as they put it, of those who remained at work. These men were, in the view of the militants, wedded to the proposition that in bad times strikes would achieve no useful results. To counteract this attitude the new leaders of the federation embarked on an extensive propaganda programme. Pamphlets such as Coal: The Struggle of the Mineworkers, Coal Facts and Mechanisation: Threatened Catastrophe for Coalfields, explained official policy at some length and were printed in editions of thirty thousand or more.1

I: Coal: The Struggle of the Mineworkers, a thirty-two page pamphlet, Orr and Nelson set out their analysis of the difficulties facing mineworkers. Despite a general return of prosperity conditions in the mines were deteriorating. Anarchic competition among the employers kept the price of coal at an impossibly low level and miners suffered as the owners sought by speed-up to increase production. Mechanisation, they predicted, would further reduce employment, increase speed-up, usher in a new series of wage cuts and pave the way for another attack on working conditions. To avoid such a calamity the federation officials

1Red Leader, 8 June 1934.

2W. Orr and C. Nelson, Coal: The Struggle of the Mineworkers (Sydney, c.1935); W. Orr, Coal Facts (Sydney, 1937); Mechanisation: Threatened Catastrophe for Coalfields (Sydney, 1935).
proposed a general policy of direct action coupled with specific recommendations. Unemployment and speed-up could be eliminated by a shorter working week and opposition to mechanisation. Working conditions could only be improved if the miners launched an extensive campaign for increased safety in the mines. The immediate need, however, was to restore the 1929 twelve and a half per cent wage cut.

The programme was, as Gollan writes, 'carried out with more energy and a clearer sense of direction than at any time in the history of the union'. But mobilising rank and file miners disheartened by three years of chronic unemployment was a different matter. Leaving aside the potentially divisive political issues, there was considerable reluctance on the part of many miners to fall in behind the new leaders.

The difficulties experienced by southern militants in matching programme with performance are clearly shown in their attempts to eliminate rationing or work-sharing. In January 1935 a stop-work meeting of South Bulli miners accepted a motion that rationing should be abolished at the pit, without dismissals. Militants had long opposed rationing on several grounds. They believed it to be a prop for dying capitalism allowing the employers to maintain profits by eliminating absenteeism and encouraging speed-up. The constant changing of workers, they contended, contributed to the increased accident rate. In the case of South Bulli colliery, rationing had been introduced in 1931. Complaints of inequalities in its operation were a constant source of friction between the miners and their employers. Opposition to rationing was linked with the question of mechanisation. In 1934 coal-cutting machines were about to be introduced to the pit with the prospect of displacement of shiftmen. To the militants the introduction of the machines merely strengthened their argument that rationing was not a

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1 Robin Gollan, The Coalminers of New South Wales, p.200. He allows the possible exception of the J.M. Baddeley-A.C. Willis leadership (1917-22).

2 Illawarra Mercury, 4 January 1935.
humanitarian device to share available work, but an attempt by the owners to reduce costs and increase production at the expense of the worker.

All miners probably accepted this argument in theory but a great many realised that their tactical position was weak. Throughout the depression years the proprietors had defended rationing as the only alternative to a reduction of the work-force. When the manager of the South Bulli pit, I. Scobie, reaffirmed this view, the miners unanimously resolved 'to stand together against any attempt on the part of the management to dismiss any man'. 1 After a joint conference the owners agreed to abolish rationing and the miners' delegates accepted, in principle, the dismissal of 193 men. 2 The miners threatened by dismissal were urged to 'stand firm' for the principle of no-rationing, but personal sacrifice of this order was not readily accepted. 3 A petition circulated among all South Bulli miners by those employees 'under notice' demanded a secret ballot on the rationing issue and indicated a willingness on the part of some to accept a modified form of work-sharing. In the subsequent poll which attracted a high turnout of voters, 307 miners supported the decision to accept dismissals while 251 voted to continue rationing. 4

The decision created considerable bitterness and lodge officials whose quarterly appointments were rarely contested were challenged at the next elections. All but one of the officials were returned with large majorities but there remained a residue of discontent. 5 Support for rationing was

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1 Ibid., 11 January 1935.
2 Ibid., 9 February 1935.
3 Ibid.
4 This decision to accept dismissals must have been the result of some 'hard talking' by those opposed to rationing but it has proved impossible to locate any accounts of the meeting.
5 Ibid., 22 February 1935. A. Hayter (470) defeated J. Price (88) for the presidency. W. Poole (459) defeated S. Beresford (100) for secretary. In a four way contest for two check weighmen. C. Lacey an incumbent was defeated votes recorded were M. Boland (232), J. Robson (182), C. Lacey (99), F. Smith (41).
not confined to the South Bulli men facing dismissal. In November miners at Old Bulli colliery voted unanimously to

... appeal to the management for the adoption of some system by which all enrolled with the colliery-miners wheelers and surface hands would be absorbed not necessarily at full time but at least for a few shifts of every week.¹

The dismissal of South Bulli miners provided ammunition for opponents of the communist leaders. They pointed to the episode as evidence of a lack of interest on the part of officials in the unemployed. Some of this criticism was political in origin and was first demonstrated at Coalcliff colliery in September 1934. The ostensible reason for the challenge was a refusal by the Coalcliff lodge to abide by the district seniority custom.² Such disputes were common enough. The seniority procedure was cumbersome and vague on points of detail. Seniority was dependent upon quarterly registration with a lodge or with the district office, and there was a thirteen-week restriction upon continuous work outside the mining industry. Moreover, seniority could not be transferred from one mine to another and was limited to a particular category of work. Wheelers, for example, might not be promoted to mining work while miners remained unemployed. Accordingly, disputes about seniority were often internal union affairs requiring a district official to adjudicate between the claims of individual workers. Some cases were difficult to decide and southern district officials considered incorporating the seniority procedures in the district rules and registering them under the Trade Union Act of 1889.³ Colliery managers frequently ignored seniority claims and promoted men into new categories when such a step would be more economical than employing additional labour. Moreover, they also often ignored seniority claims by employing a younger man in preference to an older. The Coalcliff dispute, however, centred on the

¹ Sydney Morning Herald, 18 November 1935.
² Record Book, 3 September 1934.
³ Ibid.
refusal of lodge officials to implement district seniority customs. The reason for their reluctance to comply with a generally accepted tradition is not clear. Lowden, however, had no difficulty explaining the conflict. 'Malcontents', he said, 'were leading the lodge away from the Federation'. He urged the central council to intervene and appealed to lodge members 'to dump' these leaders. Failing this, Lowden felt, the lodge should be expelled.

Lowden's comments and the dispute which provoked them reflect the fight going on within the Labor Party which was necessarily projected back into the politics of the union. The southern miners had cancelled their affiliation with the Labor Party in 1933. The election of Orr and Nelson, to the executive positions of the Miners' Federation in 1934 emphasised the division within the union between those who still supported Lang and those who supported the communists. Anti-Lang members of the ALP were working closely with the latter. The factions were most clearly revealed in the 1934 elections for the central council. In an attempt to wrest control of the Miners' Federation from the communists, the Lang faction nominated candidates for the positions of president and secretary. In a bitter campaign C. Anlezark and J. Logan, the Lang nominees, denounced the communist tactics as being those of 'abuse and skite'. They offered

1 CCM, 2-6 April 1935.
2 Ibid.
3 See Chapter Four, p.193.
4 It was alleged by the Sydney Morning Herald, that Lang had 'personally taken charge of the campaign against the miner's leaders'. He addressed meetings in the northern district in support of C. Anlezark and J. Logan who opposed Orr and Nelson. Several reasons were given for the move (1) That the Unions are threatened by Communist control; (2) that Orr and Nelson, as members of the MMM were Communists; (3) that the only political party which could help the miners was the Lang Labour party; (4) that the only 'rank and file' candidates are the pledged Lang Labour nominees. See Sydney Morning Herald, 29 October 1934.
5 Manifesto Miners' Central Council Elections pamphlet (Organised Labor Movement), Sydney, 1934.
instead a policy of co-operation with the Labor Party and promised to work towards a reconstruction of the coal industry. ¹ By adopting the communist 'policy of exclusion' from the Labor Party, Anlezark and Logan claimed, that the miners would be 'beaten to their knees'.² Further, since the coal industry was fighting for its very existence  

...talk of 'struggle' and 'organization' and other mass rallying cries without some constructive method of demonstrating how the coal mining industry is to be restored, is only to fool the workers in the industry. That is what our opponents are trying to do, but we do not think you will be fooled on this occasion.³

Militants, they declared, were placing 'struggle' ahead of concern for the unemployed.⁴

As positive policy the Lang nominees advocated closer organisation to resist attacks upon wages. They appealed directly to the old socialist element in the federation and promised to develop 'One Big Union' within the coal industry. They also offered to reorganise  

...the coal mining industry to protect the home market for coal, to develop electric power resources of the Commonwealth on the basis of coal, to develop the oil and by-product resources of coal under national ownership, large-scale development of the shale-oil industry, and provision for the transfer to other industries of every unemployed miner not absorbed in this scheme of reorganization.⁵

In answer to this attack the south coast MMM condemned Anlezark and Logan as 'splitters' who wished to use the union 'as a milking cow for political opportunists'.⁶ They denounced the policy proposals put forward by the Langites

¹Ibid.
²Ibid.
³Ibid.
⁴Ibid.
⁵Ibid.
⁶Against the Splitters, pamphlet issued by South Coast District Militant Minority (Wollongong, 1934).
as 'more suited to the coal owners than the miners'.

To speak of transferring the unemployed miners to other industries in the present stage of capitalism is to betray bankruptcy and subjection to reformist illusions. The real fight of the miners is against speed up and mechanisation and for a shorter working week and a guaranteed weekly wage.

The communist leaders had little time to consolidate their position before the challenge of the Langites. They had, however, achieved a degree of success in all districts and were able to campaign with some justification on their record. In the southern district, strikes at Wongawilli and Scarborough had won concessions from the employers. Moreover, at Wonthaggi in Victoria, where the MMM was dominant and where none of the bitter divisions between Langites and communists existed, the Federation scored a major victory to which it could point as an illustration of the success of its tactics. In the event, southern miners supported the return of the communist leaders. Support for Lang, although always a factor to take into consideration, was not sufficiently strong to offset the prevailing disillusion with politics and politicians. The return of the communists marks the beginning of a consistently militant policy by southern miners.

Support for the communists did not automatically carry with it endorsement of counsels of direct action. The reluctance of many miners to strike was often based on a realistic appraisal of the tactical situation. Throughout the latter part of 1934 there was a series of disputes at various collieries centred on the issue of seniority which culminated in a strike at Mt Keira during November. In September Mt Keira miners had voted 'by an overwhelming majority not to allow wheelers to be promoted [to mining] while there are unemployed miners'. The incident which

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1 Ibid.
3 Record Book, 10 September, 22 September 1934.
4 Ibid., 23 September 1934.
eventually provoked the strike was the refusal of the company to engage the district check inspector who was next in order of seniority for re-employment as a shiftman. At a meeting to discuss calling a strike, some miners wanted to know how the policy of direct action was to be implemented and what financial support they could expect from the federation whose leaders were alleged to be 'the chief advocates of direct action'.

The questions revealed the doubts of the majority of lodge members. On the other hand, their militant colleagues had gravitated to the sceptical of district policy which sought to isolate grievances and pursue strike action only on a limited front. Many, remembering the defeat of 1929-30, wanted the federation executive to state whether they intended to order a general strike or if they planned to confine disputes to a single district. Questions of funds were inseparable from those of tactics. In 1931 the central council of the Miners' Federation had instructed the districts to assume financial responsibility for their own strikes. Unless the central council reversed this decision their pleas for solidarity were likely to fall on deaf ears. A promise by Orr to subsidise any district strike-levy won over some of the doubters. But, when speaking to Mt Keira miners, he would not be drawn into any statement as to whether direct action opened the way for a general strike, or simply indicated a greater willingness by the federation to support local strikes. Such a question, he considered, was premature and was a matter for the central council to consider. He defined council policy as 'not for arbitration, but for conciliation and when that failed for direct action'. At Mt Keira these tactics were successful, but hardly in their own right. The colliery had just obtained a contract with the railways

1Ibid.

2Illawarra Mercury, 30 November 1934.

3See Chapter Two, p.67.

4Illawarra Mercury, 30 November 1934.
department and the proprietors were anxious to fulfil it. In these circumstances the miners were able to win some concessions.

The new federation executive, however, envisaged more than piecemeal concessions. During 1935 and 1936 they prepared a comprehensive programme of reform. It was directed towards increasing wages, safety and employment. Orr outlined the programme in Coal Facts:

1. Working hours to be thirty per week underground and thirty five per week on the surface.

2. Wages be paid at the minimum rate of 25s. per day underground and 21s. per day on the surface, with a restoration of the 12½ per cent wage cut for all contract workers.

3. Immediate creation of a permanent Safety in Mines Bureau to enforce new and safer methods of working. Immediate amending of the Coal Mines Regulations and Electrical Special Rules to ensure a maximum of safety and health protection, including an amendment to prohibit the employment of safety officials in production.

4. The establishment of a Pensions Fund for the retirement of old men on a weekly pension of not less than £2 (two pounds), in addition to the amount of the Old Age Pensions allowable. The Pensions Fund to be raised by a levy of 3d. per ton on production and supplemented by a grant from royalties.

5. The drafting and reinforcing of regulations to compel the adoption of hydraulic stowage for the conserving of coal resources.

6. Review and substantial reduction of coal freights rebate to be not less than 1s. per ton.

7. Immediate commencement with the development of the coal and shale oil industries.

8. The drafting of a Coal Bill to legalise the first seven points of this programme and to control the production, prices and marketing of coal.¹

In 1937 the southern district sent representatives to a state conference of the Miners' Federation to prepare a log of claims, which was subsequently presented to the owners towards the end of June. The submission of the log was accompanied by stop-work meetings and resolutions of support.

¹W. Orr, Coal Facts (Sydney, 1937), p.31.
from the Illawarra Trades and Labor Council and from local unions. The keynotes of the campaign were firmer organisation and communication with union members. Speaking to aggregate meetings of southern miners, Orr rebuked those who encouraged 'petty stoppages' for their shortsightedness. Economic conditions, in his view, favoured militancy more so than they did in 1929. The federation was financially sound, although for the moment any strike should be confined to New South Wales 'as a sectional fight to determine the general position'.

Mindful of the resentment aroused among southern miners in 1929 at the refusal of the federation to declare a state-wide coal strike, Orr made it clear that any future direct action would involve all districts. He admitted that it would not be possible to guarantee strikers full food relief payment, but promised sufficient relief to ensure 'men could not be starved back to work'.

On 19 July BHP rejected the log, although other proprietors returned equivocal answers. The company's stand was no surprise to southern miners. Lowden predicted that a strike was inevitable and preparations for the coming struggle were stepped up. Some miners cautioned officials against permitting the dispute to go to arbitration. In their view the wage cuts implemented in 1930 proved conclusively that the court was concerned merely with regulating the economy and not with dispensing wage justice. However, at a compulsory conference called by the New South Wales Industrial Commission before Judge Cantor the federation accepted a compromise. By agreement, an award was registered which granted the union's wages claim in part, but none of the other points of the log. In effect, the wage-cuts made during the 1929-30 lockout were restored; contract rates were increased by ten per cent and offhand labour by five per cent. A supplementary agreement negotiated with southern proprietors resulted in further gains.

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1 *Illawarra Mercury*, 9 July 1937.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.
between fifty and eighty per cent and the minimum rate for deficient places was increased by 1s 6d per day with a similar gain in water money payments.\(^1\)

Southern district officials through the Illawarra Trades and Labor Council congratulated

...the leaders of the Miners' Federation upon the successful outcome of their campaign for a better deal for mine workers. The gains made represent an important advance in the standards of the miners and are clearly the result of a splendidly organised campaign in which able and courageous leadership combined with unity discipline and organization on the part of the men and this led to victory.\(^2\)

At the same time they foreshadowed further initiatives by the federation and declared that

The determination of the union to continue the agitation for a shorter working day, better working conditions etc., has the full support of the Council and together with the gains already made should serve as an incentive to the workers in other industries to join in a movement for the 40 hour week higher wages and improved conditions.\(^3\)

Most miners accepted the outcome as a federation victory. Criticism of the compromise came, however, from the Langites faction and from some militants. The latter argued that more would have been gained by striking and were contemptuous of the willingness with which Orr and Nelson bowed to the court. The Langites for their part made political capital of the apparent inconsistency of men professing to oppose arbitration and accused the officials of duplicity. In his defence Orr told southern miners that Judge Cantor had acted as a conciliator and not as an arbitrator and that the end result was a consent agreement not an award.\(^4\) There was in fact little new in these tactics. Officials of the federation had traditionally combined a profession of faith in direct

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\(^1\) NSW Industrial Gazette, Vol.11, pp.624-6, 1937; Common Cause, 4 September 1937.

\(^2\) Illawarra Mercury, 20 August 1937.

\(^3\) Ibid.

\(^4\) Ibid., 27 August 1937.
action with recourse to the Arbitration Court when there was some immediate and concrete gain in view.

In the event better wages ensured that neither criticism undermined support for official policy. There were always those who counselled strike action and the ranks of the Langites were thinning. It soon became clear, moreover, that acceptance of the compromise was only the 'first round' - a 'second round' was to follow. In early 1938 a systematic campaign against mechanisation was begun. Coal-cutting machines had been in use in southern mines for some time and there had not been substantial opposition to their use. Yet disputes over payments to the men working behind the cutters, filling skips, were common. Since the introduction of cutting-machines involved the displacement of miners at a time when thousands remained unemployed the resistance of workers grew. Moreover, on the southern coalfield, as in the north, miners were aware that BHP planned the mechanical cutting and filling of coal. The first action by the company was in the northern district and southern miners feared similar steps would be taken at the company's Wollongong collieries.

A handful of left wing communists led by J. (Jack) Hitchen argued against the communist-led federation policy and declared that miners should welcome mechanisation.\(^1\) Its acceptance in their view would sharpen the conflict between workers and capitalists and hasten the revolution.\(^2\) With varying degrees of commitment, most southern miners were prepared to strike against further mechanisation. The majority, however, conceded that further mechanisation was inevitable and sought to impose conditions upon their acceptance of it. In the short-term, they wanted restrictions upon the use of coal-cutting machines for the extraction of pillars, greater efforts by the owners to ease the dust problem which the machines aggravated, and guarantees that in the employment of machine workers the

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\(^1\) Ibid., 9 July 1937.

\(^2\) Ibid.
union's seniority rulings would be accepted. To avoid long-term displacement of men they demanded shorter hours and a pension scheme with retirement at sixty. Their claims were expressed in the slogan: 'We Want Two Hours Off the Day and Nothing Off the Pay; we want Holidays, Safety and Pensions too'.

In August 1938 southern delegates attended a national convention to formulate a log of claims embodying these and other points. As served on the Commonwealth and state governments and all coalowners on 23 August the log demanded:

1. That a five-day week of 6 hours per day be recognized as a full working week for all coal and shale employees without reduction of pay;

2. That all workers employed on piece work or contract work shall be guaranteed a minimum wage;

3. That the government introduce a special Compensation Act to cover the coal mining industry;

4. That all mine workers on reaching the age of 60 years be pensioned off with £2 per week;

5. That all employees be paid for 14 days' holidays annually;

6. That all wages be paid weekly.

When the 14 days' notice had expired, a national coal strike was declared. Many southern lodges did not wait for the official declaration of the strike but stopped work immediately. By 9 September all southern district miners, apart from those employed by two non-union pits located outside the Wollongong area, had struck. Within a week these collieries accepted the federation's offer of relief payments equal to those given miners at union pits and joined the strike.

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1 Ibid., 8 August 1938.


3 Illawarra Mercury, 16 September 1938.
The formal compilation of a presentation of the log of claims at the national level was not simply the work of an energetic, clear-sighted leadership. Vixx and Nelson were the spokesmen of rank and file discontent which they successfully harnessed, but of which they remained a part. By late 1937 men who had been prominent organisers in the Unemployed Workers' Movement were returning to work in greater numbers. Reputations gained in advocating the cause of the unemployed quickly won them lodge positions. To their union activities these men brought not only a tougher attitude towards the employers in pit-head negotiations but also a greater appreciation of the need for organisation and a clearer understanding of how this could best be achieved.

The first step was the creation of 'area committees' throughout the coalfield communities. To each area committee representatives of the lodges which drew workers from the area were elected. The organisation of miners by residential area rather than by work-place was a realistic appraisal of how they might best be held together in a strike. The changing employment opportunities within the coalfield meant that more and more lived at some distance from their work and any given neighbourhood might contain miners from several collieries. On this village basis, an area committee might be called together and act in a matter of hours without any significant cost.

Preparations for the strike were more thorough in the smaller villages such as Coledale where whole communities participated in committee activities. There is a clear parallel between the area committees and the self-help units of the Unemployed Workers' Movement. In anticipation of a prolonged strike, which most now accepted as inevitable, rabbiting and fishing teams were appointed, firewood camps established and communal gardens prepared. Demonstrations

1 Area committees were formed at Helensburgh, Scarborough, Coledale, Thirroul, Bulli-Woonona, Corrimal, Balgownie, Wollongong, Mt Keira, Mt Kembla, Figtree and Dapto, see Common Cause, 10 September 1938.

2 Common Cause, 3 and 10 July 1938.
aimed at winning more general support throughout the community and at maintaining rank and file enthusiasm were organised in most villages. The banners carried during a demonstration at Thirroul reminded local shopkeepers that 'When Labor Starves Business Goes Bankrupt'. A procession of floats depicted the sub-standard housing and the crude makeshift conditions under which women laboured in the homes.¹

Preparations for the strike also reveal a greater awareness of the need to counter boredom and stimulate community spirit. Most area groups established committees to organise sports tournaments and social events. Classes were held to discuss strike tactics and to encourage the participation of younger miners.² An adjunct of this educational programme was a special staging of Clifford Odet's strike-play 'Waiting for Lefty', and 'Where's that Bomb' a series of skits on patriotism and loyalty.³ The formation of a women's auxiliary organisation in late 1937 was a development which underlines the degree of community participation engendered by the miners' campaign. A Coledale housewife M. (Maude) Hitchen urged women to prepare for the strike and to consider the miners' demands for better conditions as part of their own 'log of claims' for social justice.⁴ Writing in Common Cause she asked

...Are our housing conditions and general environment satisfactory?...A camera would reveal some appalling things about our dwellings here in Coledale and other mining villages! Leaking roofs through which rain pours on the beds; broken windows patched up with rags and bits of packing cases to prevent the wind blowing us out of bed; no baths; no laundry conveniences; and for these shacks, in which often enough the floors are unsafe due to depredations of white ants (often the lining of bags and paper falling in tatters), many miners and unemployed are paying from 10/- to 12/- rent per week.

¹Illawarra Mercury, 12 August 1938.
²Ibid., 19 August 1938.
³Ibid., 12, 19 August 1938; Common Cause, 13 August 1938.
⁴Common Cause, 3 and 10 July 1937.
In these places is it any wonder that epidemic diseases play such havoc with child life. In addition to this horror of dwellings here in Coledale a sanitary depot, opposite the hospital, dumps tons of night-soil into the sea, which washes up all along the beaches where our children, children of mine workers and unemployed are infected with filthy diseases; these flies invade our hovels and pollute our food. ¹

The formation of the auxiliaries demonstrates the social dimension of the strike. Most miners had welcomed the stoppage at the outset. The rest were won over to whole-hearted acceptance by the skilful presentation of a comprehensive humanitarian case. Strike leaders were concerned not merely with a series of work-grievances but with the whole living standards of miners and their families. What had been grimly endured in 1931 could no longer be tolerated in 1938. No miner would deny the iron logic of six years' experience.

Most miners were aware that the granting of all their claims would constitute something approaching a social revolution on the coalfields. Accordingly, they anticipated a lengthy strike followed by a protracted period of negotiation. ² For the owners to accept all or even some of the proposals there must be in advance government acceptance of the changes involved and a willingness to underwrite them in financial terms. Since conservative governments held power in Canberra and in Sydney miners saw the dispute as having a political dimension. For this additional reason negotiations without the threat of a strike would have been fruitless. Yet it should not be overlooked that the stoppage was as well managed in its timing as in its strategy. The threat of war had stimulated the manufacture of armaments and coal was in great demand, especially at the Port Kembla steelworks. Orr was confident that miners could maintain themselves 'longer than the country could do without coal'. ³

¹ Ibid., 3 July 1937.
² Illawarra Mercury, 5 August 1938.
³ Sydney Morning Herald, 8 September 1938.
The conservative press denounced the strike threat as 'brazen economic blackmail'. The Sydney Morning Herald declared the stoppage a 'wild-cat' one and claimed that a few agitators were responsible for the calling of the coal strike.

...responsible for the calling of the coal strike. What is more there is every reason to believe that the general run of the miners themselves while they stand by their union have no enthusiasm whatever for 'direct action' resorted to by their leaders. How little the strike is really wanted by the men would probably be revealed most illuminatingly if their attitude were expressed not by mass meetings - when opposition to 'fighting' demands is extremely difficult - but by secret ballot. This order to strike is no spontaneous manifestation of industrial feeling but a worked up 'stunt', a part of the bargaining game which now threatens to get out of hand. It is unwanted one might shrewdly surmise by those very officials who have declared it.

After six weeks with no sign of the miners wilting, the dispute was brought before the Commonwealth Arbitration Court. Aggregate meetings of southern miners were at first prepared to resist a return to work. In the event, they accepted assurances by their officials that the state government would honour its promises of immediate legislation to improve safety in the mines and to provide for compensation payments to 'dusted' miners. Moreover, before the strike had begun, the New South Wales government appointed a Royal Commission on the Safety and Health of Workers in Coal Mines with Mr Justice Davidson as chairman and Lowden, the southern district president, as a commissioner.

The delays were many, and miners' suspicion of a 'double cross' increased. But the reforms eventually made were, as Gollan writes, the 'greatest ever made to the advantage of the workers in the mining or any other industry'. The changes were embodied in two awards: the first, given by Judge Drake-Brockman on 29 June 1939, and a subsequent award of 8 October 1940 which consolidated a series of judgments

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1 Ibid.
2 Ibid.
3 Robin Gollan, The Coalminers of New South Wales, p.213.
and interpretations made by the full court and by individual judges. The final award granted a forty-hour week for all underground employees, to be worked in five days of eight hours, bank to bank. Surface workers, however, continued to work eighty-six hours a fortnight. Ten days annual leave was conceded for men on forty hours and eleven days to men working more than forty hours. The gains were achieved, however, at some cost to union principles. Days lost by unauthorised stoppages were to be subtracted from leave entitlement. The holding of pit-top meetings, refusal to work on Saturdays by surface workers and the rejection of overtime were to be similarly penalised.¹

The report of the Royal Commission on Safety and Health promised reforms which met most of the miners' claims. Among its most important recommendations were detailed rules for the improvement of air circulation and the prohibition of ventilation by furnace in all but small mines employing not more than eight men. The commission accepted the miners' argument that the owners should provide protective equipment such as helmets, shin guards, goggles and safety boots. Lowden's efforts ensured that subsequently the Workmen's Compensation Act was amended to bring practically all lung diseases contracted by miners under its provisions.²

The claims for compulsory retirement with a pension at 60 years were placed before a further commission which eventually recommended weekly pensions of £2 for a miner, £1 for his wife and 8s 6d for each dependent child. In 1941 the Coal and Shale Mine Workers Pensions Act implemented the commission's recommendations although the pension payable to a man and wife was 5s less than suggested. Miners were disappointed also with the decision to fund the pensions by equal contributions from the government and from the miners themselves matched by equal contributions from the coal

¹ 40 CAR, p.387. The penalty provisions involving loss of holiday rights in the case of strikes or absenteeism were withdrawn in 1941. See NSW Industrial Gazette, Vol.lxiii, pp.546-9.
² 41 CAR, p.37.
The miners had been hopeful that the scheme would be financed solely by an excise duty on coal.¹

Unionism among the coalminers of the Wonglongong district survived however tenuously during the depression because it was firmly rooted in the social fabric of the mining communities and because the miners were steeped in its traditions. The situation was different for the iron and copper workers. Traditions of the kind evident among coalminers had not the time to take root at Port Kembla where unions almost disappeared during the depression and working conditions deteriorated markedly. By 1934 some precarious progress had been made in rebuilding the ironworkers' branch. T. (Paddy) McDonald, for example, claimed twenty-eight financial members in 1934.² There were serious obstacles in the way of a union revival. First, the crowds of men looking for work 'on the hill' did not noticeably diminish in number until the outbreak of war in 1939. It is possibly true, as Merritt claims, that an undue 'proportion of single men and unruly wanderers' who had settled at Port Kembla were always ready 'to fight the bosses',³ but this was more with words than deeds. The despairing rather than belligerent attitude of these itinerants is clearly evident in a piece of doggerel which appeared in the ironworkers' paper Steel & Metal Worker:

We're working for the B.H.P., we have slipped our swags awhile,
We're just in from off the track, after tramping many a mile;
Shifting muck on construction work, or building machinery,
We live in a tent in Flinders Street, amongst the misery.

² Illawarra Mercury, 20 March 1934.
³ Merritt, op.cit., p.226.
The bosses here speed us up, its sweat and grease and grime all day, And the stink of fumes from the furnace stacks, rot our lungs away. Or working in the rain all day with nothing to keep us dry, And home at night to a tent that leaks, enough to make you cry. It is two days on and five days off, half our time on the hill, Living in hopes of a permanent job, so that we can pay our bill. They say we're lucky to have the work, they don't mention the pay, Little enough, a full week in, let alone missing a day.

Yet McDonald was especially conscious of 'Woolloomooloo Joe' or 'Surry Hills Tim', married itinerants from Sydney who were ready to 'crawl' for work. BHP was no less careful to scrutinise those it employed than Hoskins, and victimisation of unionists continued, according to McDonald, to inhibit union growth. Nevertheless membership rose with the expansion of the steel plant. By 1937 the Port Kembla FIA branch had 750 members. There are several explanations for this progress. A nucleus of staunch ex-unionists waiting their chance had persisted in the spun pipe department. Coalminers now entering the steelworks needed little persuasion to join the union. If conditions among coalminers were bad in the early 1930s they were in many respects worse at the steel-works but among the unorganised hands generally there was not the will to rise above passive acceptance of their lot. The expansion of the plant had the ironic effect of intruding just that element of staunch unionism that the ironworkers had lacked. To the mechanical advantage of numbers was added an even more important advantage of spirit. Deplorable

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1 Steel & Metal Worker, 3 December 1937.
2 Ibid., 3 September 1937.
3 Ibid.
living conditions were a constant reminder of the social
cost of industrial progress. McDonald contrasted the
expansion in the steelworks at Port Kembla with the deprivation
faced by workers.

To give life to the drive for raising our living
standard, we must approach the question from the
angle of recognising our economic position
today, and what it was in 1929. In the short
space of time which has since elapsed we have
lost up to 25/- per week in wages, due to what
some people who are ignorant of the economic
cause called depression, speed up is more
rampant since the return of so called
'prosperity' which has caused so much jubilation
amongst capitalists and landlords, but we find
the position of the employed worker has not
improved. All round increases in the price of
food, clothing and rents are taking place. In
these circumstances the basic wage of £3.10.0
is below subsistence for a family. Have we not
evidence of this on the South Coast, particularly
at Port Kembla and Wollongong districts today?
Take the question of rent here we find workers
forced to pay up to 35/- and £2 per week in
many cases...real wages are considerably lower than the
actual 25/- per week reduction represents.

The failure of wages to keep pace with the cost of
living increased suspicion of 'big-business'. All large-scale
industry, McDonald argued, sought by speed-up and by
victimisation to promote further expansion. To McDonald this
process was self-perpetuating and could lead only to the
continued exploitation of the workers. Since BHP was
virtually without competition as an employer at Port Kembla
the workers were unable, McDonald pointed out, to escape its
dominating power. 2

The company was frequently described by labour spokesmen
as a government-protected colossus trampling rough-shod over
the interests of workers. It was this that the federal
member for Werriwa, H.P. Lazzarini, had in mind when he
declared:

The psychology of its management is such that it
believes that its employees should submit to
industrial conditions which prevailed in Europe

1 Steel & Metal Worker, 18 December 1936.
2 Ibid.
a century ago. The conditions of labour in this industry constitute a menace to the majority of those employed in it. The workers of Australia have been conceded the right to organize themselves, and to form trade unions, but an official of a union comprising employees of this company cannot notify the management of decisions reached by the organization without being dismissed. It is urgently necessary that the hours of labour observed in the works at Port Kembla should be reduced... men are engaged for twelve hours a day, and overtime which should be resorted to only in special circumstances, has come to be regarded as normal. If the men decline to work overtime they are sacked. The very long hours of labour are wearying and cause hardship and dangers which no employees should be expected to endure.... The works are known in the district as 'The Butcher's Shop', or 'The Slaughter Yards'.... The management tries persistently to convince the employees that, if they object to their conditions of employment, they will be discharged. It knows only the psychology of the big stick. Much of the work is unskilled and the company knows that thousands of men in the locality are in want of employment.1

There was little exaggeration in Lazzarini's allegations. Conditions at the steelworks were primitive. The increased building activities after 1935 added to the general untidiness of the plant and accidents increased in number. There were no lockers or washing facilities or dining rooms and no roads or footpaths around the mills. As noted earlier a growing number of steelworkers lived some distance from the steelworks and that while most northern villages were linked by rail to the steelworks, in most cases getting to work involved considerable time and effort. In winter a steelworker might, as Merritt writes, 'leave home in the dark... trudge a mile and a half through mud and rain, dry out in front of a furnace, eat his meal on the job, be instructed to work overtime and then return home in the dark, wet, cold and dirty'.2 He had to begin work again next morning at 7.30. The systematic working of overtime was a major grievance. Men were seldom told that overtime would be

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2Merritt, op.cit., p.230.
necessary until they were actually working their shift and
to refuse 'to work another hour or two' was to risk
dismissal. The provision of an evening meal for men on
overtime was guaranteed by law but there were no safeguards
as to its quality. The meal often consisted of door-slab
sandwiches smeared with peanut butter, or stale, cold pies.
Frequently the food arrived late. An ironworker describes
the announcement of overtime: 'Work on boys we have sent for
some crib... and the crib arrived late, very late, you may
as well take it home.'

Dissatisfaction was not confined to the ironworkers.
Skilled craftsmen harboured grievances also. The district
organiser of the AEU, J. Ward, made continued requests
throughout 1934 for 'a more stringent application of safety
principles'. A Safety First Committee established by the
engineers was ignored by the company. As an itinerant
organiser Ward could do little without local backing. On
paper he appeared to have weight of numbers on his side.
Membership of the Port Kembla sub-branch had doubled since
1932 and by 1936 claimed 419 members. However, by no means
all were financial and along with other craft unions the
AEU was compelled to appoint McDonald, the FIA secretary, to
check on unfinancial members. At the same time Ward,
anxious to mobilise support where he could, declared he
would back any union which opposed systematic overtime.
This is not to say that divisions between the ironworkers and
the craftsmen did not exist. Men whose job was to maintain
machinery could not, for example, be expected to lend much
support for the growing opposition to mechanisation among

1 Steel & Metal Worker, 12 February 1937.
2 Interviews with Mr E. Arrcysmith, 14 April 1973; Mr W. Frame,
3 Steel & Metal Worker, 26 February 1937.
4 AEU Monthly Reports, May 1934, pp.23-4.
5 Ibid., published accounts, September 1934.
6 Ibid., May 1934, pp.23-4.
unskilled labourers. According to Ward, however, they were 'prepared to scrap' for the elimination of overtime which prevented more men from gaining employment, for improved safety and for preference to unionists.2

The craft unions were called upon for their support sooner than they anticipated. On 24 January 1936 Port Kembla ironworkers and BHP became involved in their first head-on conflict. The occasion of the dispute was the dismissal of a union delegate in the 36-inch mill. N. (Norman) Annabel, the man concerned, refused to work overtime. The award under which ironworkers and craftsmen were working at Port Kembla provided for eight and three-quarter hours' work per day. Yet in early January the company fixed ten hours' per day as the standard for men working in the 36-inch mill. A meeting of the mill's shop committee voted unanimously to refuse all overtime. It was as the conveyor of this decision to the mill superintendent that Annabel was dismissed. A stop-work meeting on 31 January organised by the FIA voted for a complete stoppage unless Annabel was reinstated and overtime eliminated. The manager C. (Cecil) Hoskins refused to discuss either demand and the ironworkers struck. A conference of all unions with members at the steelworks was held in Sydney on 3 February. There was a unanimous vote to support the strikers and to withdraw all labour from the plant.3 Work ceased at the steelworks on 4 February. Port Kembla watersiders refused to handle any material for the company, and when BHP attempted to shift coal supplies from its collieries and coke from its coke ovens, miners and cokeworkers at the pits joined the strike.4

Throughout the dispute BHP refused to consider the reinstatement of Annabel. The willingness of the company to

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1 Ibid., December 1935, p.20.
2 Ibid.
3 Unions involved in the stoppage were: Engine Drivers and Firemen's Association, Amalgamated Engineering Union, Australasian Society of Engineers, Electrical Trades, Moulders, Boilermakers, Blacksmiths, Bricklayers and Carpenters.
4 Illawarra Mercury, 7 February 1936.
make a stand for compulsory overtime is difficult to understand even in its own terms. It appeared, however, to consider that by limiting the employment of skilled workers and by imposing overtime, its costs would be lowered and efficiency increased. In negotiations with the unions the company offered to place Annabel elsewhere in the plant. BHP suggested also that men not wishing to work overtime should transfer to another section, which was an evasion of the issue of adequate wages for all workers in the plant. Requests by the unions for a conference to discuss other grievances were ignored. The Industrial Commission declined to deal with the dispute until the men returned to work and instituted deregistration proceedings against the FIA. Justice Cantor allowed the order to remain unsigned for fourteen days but when the strikers did not return to work the union was formally deregistered.

The strike continued for ten weeks before the combined unions' committee, which was co-ordinating the strike, declared that

...after surveying the struggle and recognising the heavy financial burden to the unions involved, it was satisfied that the results obtained from the struggle were worth while, in that it accomplished the stabilisation of trade union organization by completely organising all workers employed, by checking the spread of overtime and forcing the company to realise that in future different methods of superintendence of workers would have to be established and that the elemental rights of workers would have to be recognised.

The committees assessment of the outcome was as far as it went, accurate enough. BHP offered to re-employ Annabel, not

1When iron and steel production had started, the employers claimed that overtime was necessary to make up for the shortage of skilled workers. The depression had interrupted training programmes within the steelworks. See Helen Hughes, op.cit., p.124.

2NSW Arbitration Reports, 1936, p.31.

in the 36-inch mill but elsewhere in the plant until his case was decided. The company further guaranteed Annabel permanent employment whatever the outcome of these discussions. For its part the FIA agreed to refer all future disputes with the company to the Industrial Commission. In subsequent negotiations the union failed to have Annabel re-instated to the 36-inch mill. Overtime, however, was substantially reduced.

In the short-term, the ironworkers had won a partial victory. The importance of the strike, however, lay not so much in the achievement of the immediate objective as in its wider implications. As the first exercise in direct action at the Port Kembla steelworks its outcome helped consolidate the position of the union. McDonald reported that, in the first week of the strike, 415 men joined the branch. Most of them probably did so to gain strike assistance. Nevertheless the strike was instrumental in rallying permanent support for the union. By 1938 the branch claimed 2,212 members, making it the third largest branch of the FIA. This growth was achieved with some difficulty. The rapid turnover particularly among construction workers continued to be a problem. The poverty-stricken camp dwellers remained difficult to organise. Yet despite these handicaps the trend after the Annabel strike was towards more complete union coverage among the ironworkers. Craft unions shared a similar experience. The AEU, for example, appointed a full-time secretary for the Port Kembla branch to cope with increased membership.

The involvement in the strike of workers from BHP collieries provided an opportunity for the development of closer links between the ironworkers and the coalminers. They already had much in common. Displaced coalminers now working at the steelworks provided a point of contact. McDonald and other FIA officials had during the depression

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1 *Illawarra Mercury*, 13 March 1936.
years been in constant contact with the more politically active miners especially through joint involvement in the Unemployed Workers' Movement. Among their former allies there were several militants who were now beginning to win lodge positions and influence district policy. Moreover, miners and ironworkers were united in their hostility to BHP. During the Annabel strike, McDonald depicted the company as a 'huge steel octopus endeavouring to smash every vestige of working class organization'. In doing so he was expressing the common view held by miners of the district's harshest employer, whose monopolistic tendencies he went on to denounce in forthright terms:

This vast monopoly principally owned by a small gang of parasites principally residing in Australia, but linked with the Steel Monopoly of Britain, has a stranglehold on the economic and political life of Australia...and every effort is being made [by the company] to gain the same grip upon the coal mining industry.

The miners had their own special reasons for hating the company, and for joining forces with its other employees. At BHP's Wongawilli colliery, new employees were carefully screened to eliminate 'trouble-makers', and victimisation was a common practice.

McDonald asked the advice of the miners' officials on strike tactics and organisation. Orr spoke at length to a meeting of ironworkers of the need for 'collective self-help' to sustain the strikers and explained the system of relief employed by the Wonthaggi miners in Victoria. He hedged when asked whether BHP would capitulate sooner if the strike were extended to the company's Newcastle steelworks. He admitted that sectional strikes often failed to place sufficient pressure on the bosses but pointed out that such tactics were sometimes successful. The steelworkers

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1*Illawarra Mercury*, 7 February 1936.
3*Illawarra Mercury*, 27 March 1936; *Common Cause*, 11 April 1936.
4*Illawarra Mercury*, 27 March 1936.
accepted Orr's suggestions for the relief of men on strike and did not seriously consider extending the strike to Newcastle in the face of his lukewarm response.

Reaction to the strike by the Wollongong community at large indicates the increasing importance of the ironworkers to the local economy. Support for the men came from many quarters. Some church leaders expressed alarm at the effect of a prolonged strike on those living in the humpy communities. They had received little assistance from the company in their campaign for housing reform and were inclined initially to be sympathetic towards the workers. This sympathy however diminished the more prolonged the stoppage became. To some extent, however, McDonald anticipated this particular criticism by arranging special sustenance for the campers.

A more serious charge which threatened to undermine such community support as existed was the claim that union leaders were at fault in not accepting under protest BHP's offer to re-employ Annabel elsewhere in the plant. It was alleged by the Illawarra Mercury that the strikers might take their case to the court with the prospect of public support. This was an opinion which some ironworkers came to share as the strike reached its sixth week. A controversial, ex-Welsh coalminer D. (Dan) Jones called a public meeting at which he urged strikers to return to work and accused McDonald of 'glory hunting'. He called for twenty-five financial members of the FIA to summon a meeting of all union members to elect 'respectable, honest, intelligent delegates' who

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1 Ibid.
2 Ibid., 7 February 1936.
3 Ibid., 20 March 1936.
4 Ibid.
5 Ibid.
would discuss an immediate settlement. In his view the strike was the work of 'Sydney's Trades Hall communists'.

Although Jones's allegations cut little ice, support for a negotiated settlement increased as the strike continued. After the strike had been in progress for two weeks a public meeting was called by the mayor of Wollongong, J.J. Kelly, a man of moderate Labor sympathies. He made attempts to bring the company and the workers together. BHP lost much public sympathy when it rejected his proposal for a conference in the following terms:

The company cannot see any good purpose by a conference at present but would suggest the best course would be for the strikers to advise us when they are prepared to resume work on the terms advised.

Support for the strikers went further than expressions of sympathy. Many Wollongong citizens contributed to the strike-fund and local businessmen were ready to accept strike-coupons. Self-interest explains much of this co-operation but the fact that many found it expedient to accept the disruption of normal business points to the growing importance of the steelworkers within the local economy. Shopkeepers and local government officials were less willing now to disparage the steelworkers as 'outsiders' and 'trouble-makers'.

The common experience gained during the strike and its partial success paved the way for closer union co-operation between all metal trades unions within the steelworks. In the past individual unions had gained little from separate negotiations with the company and there had been few attempts to work out common tactics. Indeed in some areas where craft

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1Ibid., 13 March 1936. For some years Jones had been an outspoken if somewhat querulous critic of strike-proponents within the Port Kembla FIA branch. His constant criticism of the branch leaders enlivened meetings. The officials did little to discourage him as they considered that the prospect of a fiery speech from Jones enticed many men to meetings. They did not, however, entirely discount him as a possible rallying point for discontented union members. They were suspicious of his activities during the Annabel strike and some felt he was in the pay of the company. Interviews with Mr E. Arrowsmith, 14 April 1973 and Mr W. Frame, 26 April 1973.

2Illawarra Mercury, 14 February 1936.
barriers had become blurred unions competed for members. McDonald contrasted division in the workers' ranks with the trend towards monopolistic capitalism exemplified by the Port Kembla 'Steel Cartel'.

The need for closer unity among the metal trade unions is essential when you view the strength of the Steel Trust opposed to us. During the last few years the Steel and Metal Companies operating in Australia have undergone a continual process of amalgamation until to-day we see a huge Steel Cartel with interests not only in the steel and metal industries but in Banking, Coal, Shipping and other financial concerns, and an example of their activities in this direction is the recent amalgamation of the B.H.P. and the A.I. and Steel Ltd.

He proposed a conference of all eleven unions with members engaged in the Port Kembla metal industries to consider the formation of a joint body, to be known as the Metal Workers' Council. The principal function of the council was to be the supervision of a campaign 'to oust non-unionists and build up 100 per cent financial unionism'. Each member union was to elect two delegates to the council. Decisions reached by it were to be transmitted to the members by job committees established in each section of the works. Conversely, it was hoped that the views of members would be conveyed from these committees to the council. To encourage this process and to co-ordinate the activities of the various job committees, a works council at each Port Kembla plant was planned. Negotiations proceeded slowly but eventually, in December 1937, something approaching the structure envisaged by McDonald, though with a looser framework, was established as the South Coast Metal Trades Group.

For McDonald the establishment of the trades group was a step towards industrial unionism. Skilled craftsmen and

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1 *Steel & Metal Worker*, 11 September 1936.
2 Ibid.
3 Ibid.
4 Ibid., 8 October 1937.
5 Ibid., 3 December 1937.
their union officials were not enthusiastic supporters of a move which, if carried to its logical conclusion, would put an end to their special status. Job committees were most successful in those areas of the steelworks, such as the coke-ovens, where craft divisions intruded least. Elsewhere, the craftsmen were reluctant to concede that their particular grievances could be understood or adequately represented by their less skilled workmates. In an attempt to win over the craft unions McDonald pointed out rather speciously that mechanisation was already weakening their bargaining position by reducing employment for men skilled in older techniques. When these arguments failed to gain the desired response, McDonald accused the craft unions of deliberately obstructing 'working class organisation' within the steelworks.

A grievance revealed by the Annabel dispute which served to divide further the ironworkers and the skilled craftsmen was BHP's policy of offering staff positions to key workers in each department. Machine operators who were on the 'permanent staff' and foremen had continued to work during the Annabel strike and union officials regarded them as potential strike-breakers in later disputes. The issue came to a head in the middle of 1937 when, in accordance with a directive from its Melbourne-based directors, the company proposed to appoint a further 127 workers to the staff. These appointments were to be distributed throughout the plant, but with heaviest concentrations at the open-hearth and at the 36-inch mill. At the same time bonus payments were introduced for process workers in the brass-foundry.

1 Ibid.

2 Illawarra Mercury, 26 February 1936.

3 BHP Archives Managing Directors' Minutes - Business Sheets (AIS), File No.26 (Carton 72), 22 July 1937.

4 The appointments were to be distributed as follows: blast-furnace, 7; open-hearth, 33; soaking-pits, 6; bloom-mill, 6; 36-inch mill, 16; 10/13-inch mill, 12; spun-pipe, 7; roll-shop, 5; jetty, 4; yard and haulage, 2; machine-shop, 1; foundry, 4; electrical-shop, 4; fabrication-shop, 1; blacksmiths, 1; power house, 6; bricklayers, 2; riggers, 3; plate-mill, 2; express drivers, 3; weighbridge, 2. Ibid.
In the hope of avoiding industrial trouble the company chose to 'simply put the extra money in the [pay] envelopes',\textsuperscript{1} rather than announce the new payments. Neither action, however, passed unchallenged. McDonald described the new policy as part of a wider programme to increase profits by speed-up. He foresaw an all-out attempt to split the workers and smash the unions by building up a work-force capable of carrying on production during a strike. These, he declared, were the methods of American capitalism, directed towards the eventual establishment of company unions.\textsuperscript{2}

There was an element of truth in McDonald's accusations. As a pre-requisite for a position on the staff, the company required men to resign from the union to which they belonged.

A mass meeting of ironworkers resolved

...that in our considered opinion recent staff appointments in the Port Kembla steelworks... [are] an attempt to undermine trade unionism and that they [sic] refuse to issue clearances to prospective staff men. Further, we decide that because of the issues involved to treat all staff men who are doing work covered by the unions concerned as non-unionists.\textsuperscript{3}

The union's grievances were put before Judge Cantor at a compulsory conference. Cantor proposed that men appointed to the staff should retain union membership, and that men already on the staff should be free to rejoin a union. BHP refused to accept either proposal but agreed to pay overtime rates to staff, and where possible to eliminate overtime. A stalemate resulted: BHP proceeded more slowly with its campaign to recruit new staff members and the workers continued their opposition to overtime.\textsuperscript{4}

While these disputes continued, dissatisfaction among the men mounted. Some bitterness at the outcome of the Annabel strike remained. At the time of the strike a minority

\textsuperscript{1}Ibid., 30 September 1937.
\textsuperscript{2}Steel & Metal Worker, 24 September 1937.
\textsuperscript{3}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{4}BHP Archives, Managing Directors' Minutes - Business Sheets (AIS), File No.26 (Carton 72), 22 October 1937.
of ironworkers had sought an extension of the strike to the Newcastle works. Others were embittered by the deregistration of the union. In their view the FIA was deregistered because it dared to oppose the will of BHP, and the 'no-strike' clause in the negotiated settlement was imposed by the court to help the company in the future. Moreover, other decisions handed down by the court reinforced their preference for direct action. In October 1935 the FIA had applied for a 3s increase in the marginal rates of semi-skilled and unskilled labour, but Judge Beeby refused to hear evidence. In April 1936 he refused a request by the FIA, the ETU and the Sheet Metal Workers to confine their awards to unionists. McDonald cited the court's treatment of Sydney foundry workers as evidence of its bias. The court had rejected claims for a 5s per week general increase and granted moulders 3s per week and ironworkers 2s per week. To McDonald and many others this was proof that the court would not

...take genuine measures to restore wages. The decision will undermine further the system of compulsory arbitration, which once again is shown to be loaded in favour of the employers. Certainly the decision of Judge Beeby cannot have stemmed the tide of revolt against low wages, if such was his intention. The decision can only have the effect of fanning the flames of revolt, leading to wage struggles in the metal trade.

Sydney foundry workers achieved wage increases rather smaller than those they sought from the court, but they were able to extract above-award rates from their individual employers. In an attempt to follow this example of direct action AEU and ASE members working in Port Kembla industries called a one-day stoppage on 25 June. They demanded a twenty per cent increase in wages and imposed a ban on overtime. The Port Kembla companies were, however, in a stronger

1 34 CAR, pp.460-2.
2 35 CAR, pp.688-90; 36 CAR, pp.73-5 and 78-80.
3 Steel & Metal Worker, 26 March 1937.
position than their Sydney counterparts to resist these claims. Competition between employers for labour, a critical factor in Sydney, was virtually absent at Port Kembla. The employers were well aware that Port Kembla was 'practically a watertight compartment of its own' and it was predicted by their spokesmen that united action would 'defeat the effort of the unions'.

During the course of the dispute tactics which were later to become familiar emerged. To the smaller companies the logical course seemed to be to range themselves behind BHP. They fully realised that the steel company would resist in order to prevent the demands spreading to other sections of the plant. For its part BHP appreciated their support. Essington Lewis, the general manager, applauded the decision of the smaller companies to stand firm. Against this degree of co-operation by the employers most union efforts faltered.

The comparative ease with which BHP checked these demands confirmed union leaders in the belief that nothing short of an all out strike in the steelworks would force concessions from the company. In mid-June 1937 painters and riggers struck against the employment of a non-unionist. Anticipating a confrontation, McDonald threatened a general stoppage, but the individual concerned took out a union ticket. The riggers were placated and a wider crisis averted. Unrest was, however, still widespread. A timely announcement by the federal court of an increase in the basic wage to some extent allayed this dissatisfaction. The court felt that the increases were justified by current prosperity and the existing circumstances of industry. It added a 'prosperity' loading of 6s a week to federal award wages. These adjustments gave all FIA members 7s to 9s more than they received in 1936. To the steelworkers these increases

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1 A.J. Burgess (industrial adviser, Australian Mines and Metal Association) to Sir Colin Fraser, 1 July 1937. Broken Hill Associated Smelters Pty Ltd File, Group 1, personal papers of Sir Colin Fraser 1/150 (Melbourne University Archives).

2 Ibid.
were a welcome if belated acknowledgment that the industrial progress at Port Kembla had so far been achieved at some cost to living and working conditions. Most, however, felt more was needed.

One clear sign that union leaders were out of touch with the discontent of their members was the almost complete victory of the communist ticket in the branch elections of December 1937. Led by P. (Pat) McHenry, the communists won all executive positions except that of assistant secretary-treasurer. Their success was aided by trends within the labour movement both locally and nationally and by their own efforts. As advocates of direct action they could illustrate the success of such methods by recent examples. McHenry, himself an ex-coalminer, cited the tactics of the miners. As he interpreted the 'first round' of their campaign, the miners had defeated BHP without a strike. This did not mean that they avoided direct action, as their policy still included negotiation with the employers and an aversion to the court. It was, McHenry asserted, the imminent threat of an organised strike which prompted the court to save face for the owners. Regardless of the validity or otherwise of this assessment, it was one that was now shared by a growing number of ironworkers.

One explanation for the success of the communists within the unions during the late 1930s suggests that, so general was opposition to the arbitration system and so confused were the political groupings within the New South Wales labour movement, that precise political colourings were not always obvious. However valid this view is of the experience elsewhere in Australia - and there must be serious reservations about such a generalisation - it is substantially misleading in Port Kembla-Wollongong. The near total collapse of unionism at Port Kembla during the depression was

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1 Steel & Metal Worker, 3 December 1937.
2 Ibid., 20 August 1937.
3 Ibid.
an indication of its previous fragile hold and the relative youth of the industrial community. In a very real sense therefore the Unemployed Workers' Movement filled the vacuum left by the disintegration of the trade unions. It provided militants with experience in the organisation of social protest. McHenry's career is an epitome of working class politics in the 1930s. He progressed from rank and file militant to unemployed leader, and so to organiser of doleworkers and finally to trade union official. After migrating to Australia in the early 1920s he worked at Mt Keira colliery until he was 'cavilled-out' in 1928. He later secured a few weeks employment at Port Kembla but was thereafter permanently unemployed. One of the leaders of the Wollongong Unemployed Workers' Movement, McHenry publicly proclaimed his communist beliefs during the free speech campaign in the Northern Illawarra municipal elections. There was no mistaking his politics.¹

The background of other members of the communist ticket were broadly similar to that of McHenry. None shared his coalmining experience but J. (Jim) Marr had partnered McHenry in the unemployed protests. An ex-seam an he was largely responsible for the 'closed shop' among the riggers and had led their strike against the employment of a non-unionist. J. (Jim) Carrabine, W. (Bill) Frame and E. (Ted) Arrowsmith were more fortunate in their depression experiences. All worked in the spun-pipe section of the steelworks and therefore had only short periods of unemployment. Their contacts with the Unemployed Workers' Movement had been few, but they built up a reputation for militancy both by their attempts to improve conditions and their outspoken opposition to the company.

This is not to say that all ironworkers accepted the communist policy in full, but merely that most recognised the untiring work of particular communists to improve their conditions. Their efforts on behalf of the workers spanned

¹See Chapter Three for McHenry's activities in the Unemployed Workers' Movement and p.177 for his involvement in the Northern Illawarra municipal elections.
a wide range of activities. They proclaimed the right to free speech, were to the fore in self-help programmes and active in the housing reform movement. These actions in themselves may have been sound communist tactics, but the workers did not need to accept them as such, and events showed that most of them did not do so. Chance also played its part in the victory of the communists. Shortly before the 1937 branch elections, McDonald was seriously injured in a motor-cycle accident. Consequently he did not campaign in the election and was not again active in union affairs. If McDonald's virtual withdrawal made victory a somewhat hollow one, the unopposed return of McHenry's entire team the following year made their position secure.

The new committee concentrated on increasing union membership within the steelworks, and on extending union cover in the Port Kembla industries and in Lysaghts factory. Before the election of McHenry the FIA had made little progress at Lysaghts. The plant was new and union leaders needed time to establish themselves. McHenry, however, had some success in encouraging more active unionism within various departments. In July 1938 men in the pickling and galvanising section struck against a proposed roster system for continuous operation within the plant and against speed-up within the works. The strike, which lasted three weeks, was complete and the negotiations which followed a return to work removed anomalies from the roster system. Following the example of the Annabel strike this success boosted the growth of unionism among workers at Lysaghts.

These advances were not matched in the copper industry, among those men who were members of the AWU. During the depression the AWU branch at Port Kembla had virtually disintegrated. After 1934 the branch staged a slight recovery in membership and by 1938 claimed 400 financial

1 Steel & Metal Worker, 3 December 1937.
2 Ibid., 18 November 1938.
3 Ibid., 12 August 1938.
members in a work-force of 600. The branch received very little assistance from its federal executive although a full-time organiser was appointed in 1936. There was much dissatisfaction among the membership when, in 1936, the union negotiated agreements with the Port Kembla companies which contained few gains for workers. During the two-year currency of the agreement the union remained relatively quiescent but local discontent was aroused by cuts in bonus rates. Workers complained also that intermittent operations at the refinery were used to practise victimisation.

Dissatisfaction with the AWU opened up the possibility of the FIA moving into the copper industries. In 1938 McHenry and Mackie applied to the court for 'right of entry' to Metal Manufactures and to ER & S. The companies opposed both applications as they saw the FIA as a 'particularly militant union'. The court, nevertheless, allowed both men entry and McHenry immediately began a campaign aimed at gaining equal preference with the AWU in the plants. At first McHenry concentrated more on Metal Manufactures. There were good reasons for this. In the first place, there were some classifications at the plant which overlapped with those of the federal ironworkers' award. Secondly, there was considerable pressure from within the works for the AWU to negotiate a compromise with the ironworkers. In November 1938 after a series of meetings between FIA and AWU officials a demarcation agreement was arranged. The AWU conceded that employees in certain departments should come under the FIA award. The unions further agreed to elect a joint committee made up of AWU representatives from Metal Manufactures and ER & S and delegates from the FIA. In practice the ironworkers were the senior partners in this

1 _Illawarra Mercury_, 27 July 1938.
2 _Steel & Metal Worker_, 18 November 1938.
3 _Metal Manufactures Notes of Meeting_, 11 November 1938.
4 _Steel & Metal Worker_, 18 November 1938.
5 Ibid.
co-ordinating body whose formation represents a significant step in the forging of a cohesive labour movement in the district, distinctly militant in spirit.

The influence wielded by the ironworkers—encouraged by McHenry and the FIA federal executive to push ahead with their plans to obtain equal preference with the AWU in the Port Kembla works. In May 1939 when the current agreement between the AWU and the companies expired both the FIA and the AWU filed a log of claims for all classifications within the works.¹ The award, as handed down by the additional conciliation commissioner Kavanagh in December, rejected the FIA claims for equal preference. There was much dissatisfaction with the subsequent award and a series of stop-work meetings passed resolutions demanding the restoration of allowances for certain classes of work. The AWU disclaimed all responsibility for the stoppages and alleged that they were instigated by FIA officials who...

...having no legal responsibility in this matter, [have] sought occasions to encourage the employees to strike against the Award and set up a condition of tyranny within the works as a means of forcing the employers into compliance with their decision to have recognition granted to the Ironworkers' Union. On each of these occasions the AWU has advised the employees to remain at work and to ignore the tactics of the Ironworkers' Union which were designed to blackmail the court and the employers into granting a recognition of the Union which had been excluded by the highest industrial authority of New South Wales on all previous occasions.²

The employers came to the same conclusion. They claimed that the stoppages were an attempt by 'the communistic element in the Ironworkers to involve the industry in a shut down'.³

¹Metal Manufactures: Notes of Meeting, 11 May 1939.

²Circular Letter, Re Inter-Union Dispute, Metal Manufactures Ltd, Port Kembla. Explanation of position by the Australian Workers' Union (W. Anderson organising secretary, New South Wales Branch), n.d. circa November 1939. Metal Manufactures File, Port Kembla.

³Notes on Meeting, 13 November 1939, Metal Manufactures File, Port Kembla.
The dispute between the FIA on one side and the AWU and Port Kembla companies on the other was a protracted one and need not be described in detail here. In 1942 the ironworkers were granted equal preference with the AWU. The inter-union dispute, however, revealed clearly that a considerable number of AWU members were anxious to throw in their lot with the FIA. To many workers it appeared that the AWU was in collusion with the company and a protest meeting at Metal Manufactures declared AWU officials black.¹ There is also evidence to suggest that some local AWU officials prepared the way for an FIA take-over. To some of the more militant-minded branch leaders there were good reasons for doing so. The FIA had the largest membership of any union at Port Kembla and had shown the advantage of numbers. L. (Len) Boardman, the communist AWU organiser who had learnt his union skills alongside McHenry in the Unemployed Workers' Movement, called stop-work meetings at Metal Manufactures and ER & S. For his espousal of the ironworkers' position Boardman was denounced by other AWU leaders as a 'blatant urger,'² and eventually dismissed from his union position.³ To Boardman the entry of the FIA into the copper industries promised a more coherent Port Kembla union coverage and brought industrial unionism a step closer. Most AWU members, however, transferred their allegiance to the FIA in the hope of more immediate and more tangible gains. Whatever motives led men to support the FIA's invasion of the copper industries, the result was to strengthen union organisation at Port Kembla and to open the way for more concerted action between unions.

¹An Open Letter to the Employees of Metal Manufactures Ltd (Port Kembla Printery), 5 August 1941.

²Circular Letter, Re Inter-Union Dispute, Metal Manufactures, op.cit.

³Interview with Mr L. Boardman, 14 April 1973.
The organisation forged at Port Kembla between 1934 and 1939 was distinctly different in character from that which existed a decade earlier. The changes which had taken place were not simply a function of size but were shaped by depression experience and subsequent developments. Since most Port Kembla unions were born during the depression they were peculiarly open to the influence of current radical attitudes. There were no established leaders and traditions to dampen militant tendencies. Leaders were able to construct a unionism whose most distinctive features were primarily the work of a group of dedicated leaders who themselves provided an example and foretaste of the wider solidarity towards which they were striving. They maintained personal friendships and loyalties across formidable union barriers while not losing sight of the needs of rank and file unionists who supported them.

The re-establishment of the Illawarra Trades and Labour Council in September 1935 was both cause and effect of this closer unity.\(^1\) When the council had ceased to meet in 1932 S. (Steve) Best its secretary continued to protest in its name on behalf of the unemployed. Aided by the southern district miners, Best began to reconstruct the council and by 1937 he had built up a membership of sixteen affiliated unions\(^2\) and helped it regain general recognition as the chief spokesman for trade unions in the district. This position was cemented by the council's support for the Annabel strike of 1936 and for the coal strike of 1938.

The growing importance of the council during this period indicates the changing nature of industrial organisation. From its formation in 1928\(^3\) the council had relied heavily upon the support of the coalminers, but in the 1930s it came to reflect the growing strength of the metal trades unions. McDonald and later McHenry served terms as president of the

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\(^1\) *Illawarra Mercury*, 8 September 1935; *Common Cause*, 11 January 1936.

\(^2\) *Illawarra Trades and Labor Council Minutes*, 13 January 1938.

\(^3\) See Chapter One, p. 40.
council. Both men encouraged the extension and consolidation of unions within the district. Particular attention was paid to establishing trade groups covering unions with members in the same general industry. The formation of the Metal Trades Group had been encouraged by the council as was a building trades group.¹ There was some success also in bringing together workers in the food trades: meatworkers, shop assistants, bakers and breadcarters.² The council endeavoured to establish links with other New South Wales labor councils. In particular, close relations were established with the Newcastle Trades and Labor Council.³ Wollongong had much in common with Newcastle. Both were coal and steel centres of national importance. Migration to Newcastle and back was not uncommon; during the Annabel strike numbers of Wollongong ironworkers returned to Newcastle and Lithgow to live with friends or relations.⁴

These vertical links between council and individual unions and horizontal links between the district and the rest of the state mark the entry of Port Kembla into the mainstream of New South Wales industrial labour. It was no longer a remote weakly-held outpost but a labour citadel in its own right. By 1938-9 an organised labour movement had emerged from a struggling collection of separate unions whose horizons were circumscribed by parochial problems. Men were beginning moreover to take roots in their new surroundings and create their own social cohesion. What tensions remained could be contained within this new organisation. Differences continued to exist between the skilled and unskilled and between the miners and their deputies. The exclusivism common among coalminers irritated

¹Illawarra Trades and Labor Council Minutes, 17 and 30 March 1937, 24 August 1938.
²Ibid., 13 March 1937.
³Ibid., 17 March 1937, 30 March 1938.
⁴Illawarra Mercury, 27 March 1936.
other union leaders. Yet what had taken place was more than a radicalisation of an active minority. Union leaders were no longer confronted with an apathetic membership. There existed among Wollongong-Port Kembla workers a general consciousness of their own interests and aspirations, as distinct from those of other sections of the community. Much of this 'consciousness' was indeed conferred by common hostility to the 'inhuman face' of BHP capitalism, as it glowered down upon their daily lives. What was at issue was not so much the size of this industrial colossus as the social effects of its capitalistic zeal directed unimaginatively to increased production at the cost of its workers and their families. This questioning of social as well as economic priorities was for many workers a reaction to harsh conditions at home and at work from which escape had once seemed almost impossible. Their determination to bar every possible road back to depression was at the same time compelling them to take new attitudes in politics.

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1 When interviewed men who were FTA officials in the 1930s commented that while the coalminers were invariably the first union group to vote assistance for a strike they clung steadfastly to their independence. Interviews with Mr E. Arrowsmith, 14 April 1973, Mr W. Frame, 26 April 1973.
Preoccupation with industrial concerns was a predictable response to the social and economic circumstances of the post-depression era. As a consequence there was a declining concern with politics and a continued suspicion of the Labor Party. The decision of southern miners to disaffiliate in 1933 had rested on the hostility of militants to Lang and on a more general belief that with Lang in control of the Labor Party in New South Wales there was little hope of defeating non-Labor state and federal governments. But the social and industrial conditions around which unionism was rebuilt also generated new political attitudes. The long-term social reforms which workers demanded had to be achieved and maintained by political means. It was easy enough to damn all current parties and politicians out of hand, but politics would not go away. Sooner or later, industrial workers would have to come to terms with the parliamentary system. This realisation can be seen in a succession of statements after 1935. Miners' officials described the success of their campaigns for pensions and better working conditions as political and class victories. FIA leaders declared that to challenge BHP was to call into question the political alliance between government and big business. The proponents of housing reform attacked what they described as established priorities in government spending. The language used was frequently communist rhetoric, but the sentiments were widely shared.

In 1935, however, there remained serious political divisions within the Wollongong labour movement. While Lang was leader, the ALP remained as unacceptable to the more militant trade unionists as it was to the communists.

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1 See Chapter Four, p.193.

2 Illawarra Mercury, 7 October 1938.
Further, the majority of workers displayed little enthusiasm for party politics while the state-federal party split continued and anti-Lang and pro-Lang factions faced each other in New South Wales. Individual communists may have been supported as trade union officials mainly on personal grounds but, for the majority of workers, the Communist Party remained an unacceptable political alternative. The history of Wollongong working class politics in the years immediately following the depression is largely taken up with attempts by the contending factions to impose some sort of political consensus. From this struggle there emerged unity of a kind, but not the kind sought by any one of the factions.

The organisation and voting behaviour of workers in the 1935 state election provide a useful measuring stick by which political attitudes may be gauged. ALP activity in both local electorates was weak. Many of the party's branches which flourished during the 1931 and 1932 had ceased to exist, and others functioned only fitfully. In practice, all that remained were two branches, one at Bulli-Woonona and the other in Wollongong. Each was assiduously cultivated as a centre of local influence by the respective members, J.T. Sweeney and W.A. Davies. Union leaders stood apart from the election campaign and meetings were, by comparison with 1932, poorly attended. It was estimated that fewer than 150 attended the opening address of Davies' campaign and the Illawarra Mercury reported that not one question was put to him. In Bulli, apart from a series of unreported street-corner meetings, Sweeney barely campaigned. This was in large part, however, due to the failure of non-Labor parties to run a candidate against him. Sweeney did not fear his communist opponent, P. McHenry.

The campaign strategy employed by McHenry and his fellow communist candidate for the Illawarra seat, J.R.K. Cranston, illustrates the party's changing attitude towards the Labor Party. The stated objective of both men was to encourage a

1 See Chapter Four, p.166.

2 Illawarra Mercury, 3 May 1935.
united front with their Labor opponents. They proposed a programme of joint struggle against the capitalists and suggested a series of general demands including better treatment of the unemployed and a shorter working week. In addition, they advocated specific local reforms such as improved housing.¹

Their decision to stress common goals rather than elaborate ideological differences was based partly on an interpretation of local social reality, and partly on changing Comintern² policies. The distance between communists and militant unionists on industrial matters was narrowing, as witnessed by the election of communist leaders in the Miners' Federation. Political differences between them had never been as great on the coalfields as they were elsewhere in Australia and they had diminished further during the depression. Few Wollongong communists were so uncompromising in their commitment to world revolution as to cut themselves off from the Australian mainstream of socialist thinking in the Labor Party. Their tactics were also in accord with the drift of Communist Party policy away from attacks on bourgeois democracy towards co-operation with the ALP. In December 1935 the Communist Party of Australia formally adopted a united front policy, but the ALP failed to respond to such overtures.³

In the event, the two sitting members were returned with increased majorities.⁴ In Bulli almost one-sixth of the

¹Ibid., 3 May 1935.

²See Alastair Davidson, op.cit., p.74, for a discussion of the Seventh Comintern Congress.

³For a discussion of the change in Communist Party policy see Alastair Davidson, op.cit., pp.72-97.

⁴Voting figures for the Bulli electorate were: J.T. Sweeney (ALP), 8,382; P. McHenry (Communist), 2,002. There were 2,323 informal votes. The bulk of the informal votes were probably cast by conservative voters who had no candidate to vote for. Voting figures for the Illawarra seat were: W. Davies (ALP), 8,086; W.L. Duncan (UAP), 6,659; A.E. Rowe (Independent), 327; J.R.K. Cranston (Communist), 659. NSW PP, 1935-6, pp.569-70.
votes went to the Communist candidate. Support was heaviest in the small coalmining communities, such as Wombarra and Scarborough, where two votes in three went to McHenry. For some, supporting McHenry was made easier by the absence of any real threat to the Labor candidate. It is likely also that, as secretary of the Corrimal Relief Workers' Association, McHenry commanded a considerable personal vote. Cranston, however, did not poll nearly so well in the Illawarra contest. He doubled the party's 1932 total, yet received only 659 votes. The circumstances of the Illawarra contest were, however, somewhat different from those in Bulli. The sitting Labor member had failed to gain a majority of primary votes in 1932 and held the seat on Communist second preferences. Rather than endanger Labor's hold on the electorate men who were otherwise dissatisfied with Davies felt constrained to vote for him. The basic considerations were local and tactical, not ideological.

Labor's improved vote in Wollongong was in accord with state-wide trends. Twenty-nine Labor candidates were successful, five more than in 1932. This performance, however, did not dispel the belief that with Lang at its head, the party's electoral chances were negligible. Defeat at the polls in fact strengthened pressure from within some branches for a reform of party procedures. The gravamen of the reformists' charge was that an inner group was controlling the party in a systematically corrupt fashion. In particular, they alleged pre-selection ballots were being manipulated and that group representation at the party's annual conference left some industrial groups under-represented. These

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1. Total seats gained and the percentage of the valid vote cast for each party was as follows: State Labor, 29 seats and 42.41 per cent; UAP, 38 seats and 33.09 per cent; Country Party, 23 seats, 12.92 per cent. See Colin A. Hughes and B.D. Graham, Australian Government and Politics, pp.450-1.

2. The AWU and the Miners' Federation each made up a group by itself, but the other groups (e.g. Land Transport, Building, Manufacturing, Public Utilities) each contained a number of unions. On the representation of unions in the ALP generally see D.W. Rawson, op.cit., pp.116-8.
grievances were supported by a group of dissatisfied Labor politicians, and what emerged was a proposal for a special conference to revise the system of representation at the party conference and to remove 'the causes of present apathy'.

Wollongong ALP branches declared against the proposed reforms. The Woonona-Bulli branch re-affirmed its 'complete confidence in the leadership of J.T. Lang', and complained that the demands for a special conference were 'contrary to the best interests of the Labor Movement'. Southern district miners' officials, however, commended the proposed reforms although they had no sympathy for a suggestion that future representation of unions on all party bodies should be limited.

The growing opposition to Lang from within the party, together with the decision of the Communist Party to work with the ALP, encouraged southern miners to seek re-affiliation. The way for such action was further cleared, in February 1936, when Lang concluded a unity agreement with the Federal Party. Among other things, the agreement recognised the supremacy of the Federal ALP executive, guaranteed continuity of membership to those who had joined the Federal ALP since the split in 1931, and set up a system of appeals to the Federal executive.

In April, the southern miners' delegate board, unanimously adopted a motion from the Helensburgh miners'

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2 Woonona Branch Australian Labor Party Minute Book, 21 May 1935.

3 Ibid., 27 August 1935.

4 Labor Daily, 24 June, 29 August 1935.

lodge proposing re-affiliation with the ALP. The motion
enumerated conditions upon which re-affiliation was to be
negotiated. It asked for written assurances from the ALP
that it would:

...upon gaining political power immediately
repeal the Crimes Act, the Transport Workers
(Licensing) Act, the ban upon working class
literature, the present censorship, the War
Precautions Act, the Illegal Associations Act,
the Permissible Income Regulations (which have
operated so harshly against many of the
mineworkers not only in this district, but
against workers in all districts of the mining
fields and elsewhere), and the removal of all
anti-working-class legislation from the
statute books of Australia.

We also insist on a guarantee that the
iniquitous wages tax will be abolished, a new
and up-to-date workers compensation act
introduced that will provide adequate
compensation for all industrial diseases; also
a new coalmines regulation act that will clearly
and unmistakeably give the mineworkers the right
to erect any timber they may deem necessary for
their own safety so as to prevent any repetition
of the Helensburgh dispute.

Also a guarantee is required that all members
who may have been deemed to be outside the Party
through the Bulli by-election, be at once given
continuity of membership and the leagues and
unions in this district in future have the right
to nominate their own candidate for
parliamentary positions.

Another condition is that none of our members
will be expelled from the A.L.P. because of
their belonging to any other working-class
party, such as the ILP., The Friends of Soviet
Union, and the Movement Against War and Fascism,
and that in the event of any such member
elected to represent us at any conference (a.)
they will be allowed to take their seats thereat
unchallenged, irrespective of what political
opinions they may hold.1

Until the final paragraph, the resolution contained little
more than a combination of traditional union requests for
legislation to improve working conditions and demands for
more say by the rank and file in party affairs. Insistence
upon the admission of members of communist auxiliary groups,

1Common Cause, 25 April 1936.
however, made certain the proposal would be rejected.

A further approach was made in June. On this occasion it came from Wollongong party branches. After 1935 militant unionists joined the ALP to regain control of the local political organisation from the Langites, and, hopefully, to influence the direction of party policy. By 1936 some branches were dominated by unionists. This was especially so at Corrimal where S. (Sam) Blakeney, a Scarborough coalminer, and E. (Ted) Arrowsmith an FIA official, led a branch comprised, in the main, of miners from the South Bulli colliery reputed locally to be a militant 'Durham pit'. It was this branch which proposed the establishment of a south coast district assembly composed of representatives from all Wollongong labour organisations. The creation of such a body was sanitised by ALP rules but the proposal was opposed by the Lang branches in the Bulli electorate. The Woonona-Bulli branch officials rejected the suggestion because they felt that 'the different political elements in the Trade Unions would render the assembly inoperative'. The same officials held the executive positions on the Bulli Electorate Council and were able to win sufficient support to ensure the defeat of the Corrimal motion.

After June 1936, as more militants entered the branches, it was increasingly difficult for Lang supporters to dampen local complaints. Their difficulties became clear during a clash between Lang and the Miners' Federation over the use of Labor Daily funds. Lang planned to establish a Sunday newspaper and to transfer the control of Radio 2KY Sydney from the state Labor council to the state ALP. The southern miners' delegate board condemned both proposals and called upon Davies, Sweeney and all Labor politicians representing coalfield constituencies to oppose Lang's attempts to cement

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1 According to the oral testimony of several miners, a number of Durham miners, many of whom were related, held lodge positions at South Bulli throughout the 1920s and 1930s.

2 Illawarra Mercury, 12 June 1936.

his personal control of the party. In reply, Davies endeavoured to carry a motion through the Illawarra Electorate Council commending Lang's attempt to float a new paper. He met unexpected opposition. The council declined to take any action until it had listened to a delegation from the coalminers. After hearing the miners' case it decided to take no further action.  

The council took a more definite and hostile stand when Lang expelled a number of Labor politicians and union officials for attending a conference to condemn his actions and to suggest ways of reforming the party. It denounced the expulsions and called on Lang to summon a special conference as provided by rule 48, delegates be properly elected by affiliated unions, A.L.P. Leagues, Councils and District Assemblies. Special conference shall consider expulsions from A.L.P., Federal pre-selections, rules of A.L.P., and paper dispute, and any other matters that special conference may desire to consider.  

Trade union officials were more critical. At a conference called by the Illawarra Trades and Labor Council they declared Davies and Sweeney out of step with the industrial movement. The conference condemned the 'fascist element' in the party which, it alleged, had by its 'ruthless and dictatorial control of the central machinery of the movement', lowered the party's prestige. It called for a restoration of unity 'upon a solid democratic basis', and pledged to end the 'period of Fascist dictatorship operating within the movement'. To achieve this end a committee was formed composed of one representative from each attending union.

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1 Illawarra Mercury, 3 July 1936.
2 Ibid., 2 October 1936.
3 Ibid.
4 Ibid.
5 Ibid.
6 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
These criticisms may be seen simply as a part of the faction-fighting within the labour movement. Certainly most Labor supporters considered them a part of a continuing struggle for influence within the party among trade union groups and between the unions and some party branches. It was a struggle moreover which most felt could only further weaken the party. Demands for change in party organisation in the name of reform were not just part of a battle for control of the party between the 'ins' and the 'outs'. In Wollongong the anti-Lang position came to represent an alternative policy closely related to the wants of local workers. This is most clearly revealed in the emergence of a 'united front' programme during the early months of 1935.

United front proposals were the result of two separate initiatives. The first came from union leaders who saw existing political divisions as hindering more militant industrial policies. The second was a product of the Communist Party's desire to stimulate working class consciousness. Both attitudes may be observed, at the grass-roots level, in disputes between the Northern Illawarra Council and relief workers' associations during 1935.

Discontent among relief workers was general. Conditions of work were bad and jobs often pointless and tedious.¹ Used to venting their grievances at stop-work meetings, unemployed coalminers did not readily accept regulations forbidding such stoppages by relief workers. The local bodies who administered the programme found relief gangs difficult to control. Gangers appointed from the ranks were frequently unable to manage men who were bored and often disinclined to work for low wages. Some gangers made little effort to do so and simply followed the dictates of their gang whose grievances they shared. It was the dismissal of one such ganger that precipitated the first united front agitation in Wollongong:

In February 1935, the Northern Illawarra Council dismissed a ganger W. Taylor. His gang had, contrary to relief work

¹See Chapter One, pp.47-53; Chapter Five, pp.237-8.
regulations, held a stop-work meeting. The men objected to being placed on curbing and guttering work unless award rates were paid. A policeman was called to order the men back to work, and the gang reluctantly complied. At this point Taylor was dismissed presumably for allowing the stop-work meeting, although it was later said that he was 'cheeky' to the council engineer.\(^1\) To the relief workers this seemed a clear case of victimisation. Taylor's cause was taken up by the southern miners' delegate board, by lodge officials at the three pits within the municipality (South Bulli, Corrimal and Mt Keira), by the Corrimal branch of the ALP, by the relief workers' association and by the Communist Party.\(^2\)

As the campaign for Taylor's reinstatement progressed, new complaints were added. The first concerned a state government proposal to place Wollongong's unemployed single men in relief camps at Cambewarra mountain, over fifty miles south of Wollongong.\(^3\) The men were to be employed on Main Roads Board work constructing a scenic highway from Nowra to Kangaroo Valley. Opponents of the scheme offered three objections. The first concerned proposed working conditions. Men at the camp were to be assigned to one of two working parties. Each group was to work a daily five-hour shift for four days a week, with a four-hour day on Fridays. Gangers and drivers were to work a ten-hour day. Wages for the majority of workmen were pegged at £2 10s a week and marginal rates, which normally applied for such work, were not paid. Unemployed leaders declared that there were obvious speed-up possibilities in the scheme. The two-shift device introduced a ten-hour working-day which benefited the government by reducing overhead costs, and left the way open for a permanent extension of the working day. The second objection related to the hardships involved by moving men away from families and friends and to the cost

\(^1\) For the origins of the dispute see Unity, 5 March 1935; Northern Illawarra Municipality Minute Book, 13 February, 17 April 1935.

\(^2\) Unity, 5 March 1935.

\(^3\) Ibid.
involved when men wished to return home at weekends. Finally, some expressed the view that the scheme would soon be extended to married men with families.¹

The campaign met with only limited success. Taylor was eventually reinstated, but the relief camps scheme continued. Another outcome was a decision to nominate E.R. Browne, vice-president of the southern district of the Miners' Federation, as a united front candidate for a municipal by-election in November 1935. With the support of all groups involved in the Taylor-relief camp protest, Browne scored a comfortable victory.² The communists were quick to capitalise upon Browne's success and claimed that the tactics employed in Northern Illawarra held lessons for all Australian workers. Writing in the Workers' Weekly, W. (Bill) McDougall, a party organiser who came to Corrimal from Sydney in 1935, pointed out that the

[Corrimal] United front was not accomplished by 'correspondence', nor by dealing with generalities. It was accomplished by Communist activists and A.L.P. activists along with non-party workers, resolutely leading the workers in the locality in their day to day demands.³

His analysis of the Corrimal united front was accurate enough, but, since his remarks were intended also as an exhortation to fellow communists, he exaggerated the role of his party. Nevertheless, the central point remains valid: the Northern Illawarra campaign witnessed a high degree of co-operation between the communists and Labor supporters.

The example of Northern Illawarra provided the momentum for further united front proposals. In 1936 a conference of united front supporters called by the Illawarra Trades and Labor Council put forward the following ten-point programme:

1. To assist in the campaign for the 40-hour week, in conjunction with the Miners' Federation demand for a 30-hour week and also a 25 per cent increase in wages.

¹Ibid.

²The votes recorded in the by-election were: E.R. Browne, 645; W. Shaw, 191; T. Silcocks, 89. See Illawarra Mercury, 8 November 1935.

³Workers' Weekly, 12 November 1935.
2. Necessary amendments to the Workers' Compensation Act.
3. Alterations and amendments to the Coal Mines Regulations Act.
5. Increase in food relief scales for recipients.
6. Full time and award rates for relief workers.
7. Abolition of the permissible income regulations.
8. For full democratic liberty of the people.
9. To struggle against the schemes of warmongers and against the development of fascism in Australia.
10. To develop united action and organization among the people for the overthrow of the Lyons and Stevens governments and the election of Labour governments on the principle of the support for the above demands.1

The conference, under the chairmanship of Sam Blakeney, elected a provisional committee to examine ways to publicise the programme as a basis for common action. The only report of the meeting does not include a list of delegates. It seems clear, however, that the lead in all discussions was taken by the men who had organised the united front campaign in Northern Illawarra.2 E.R. Browne, one of the successful united front candidates for the Northern Illawarra Council, proposed that the initial emphasis should be placed on industrial rather than political concerns. Particular attention was to be paid to improving the working conditions of relief workers. The programme, however, encompassed most

1 Illawarra Mercury, 16 October 1936; Common Cause, 10 and 17 October 1936.

2 The provisional committee was made up as follows: S. Blakeney (Scarborough miner), S. Creighton (Helensburgh miner), E. Arrowsmith (FIA), P. McHenry (representing the Communist Party and Corrimal Relief Workers' Association) and S. Best (secretary of the Illawarra Trades and Labor Council). Others to attend the conference included: E.R. Browne (vice president of southern district miners and alderman on the Northern Illawarra Council), F. Martin (alderman on the Northern Illawarra Council), S. Platts (Helensburgh miner). Ibid.
grievances and the committee was prepared to work with diverse groups. The demand for improved housing, for example, found support from the middle class housing reformers and eventually led to the formation of the South Coast Housing Committee.1

The provisional committee's first political venture was the organisation of a full ticket of Labor candidates for the 1937 municipal elections. United front spokesmen argued that workers erred when they dismissed local politics as being of little importance. On the contrary, lack of concern on the part of workers in the past had allowed the 'onslaught on democracy now in progress by the apologists of Fascism'.2 Primitive housing conditions and rack-renting by 'conscienceless landlords were depriving workers of their freedom to live'.3 Unless Labor men concerned themselves with municipal affairs there would be no counterweight to the 'propertied and exploiting interests'.4 Labor candidates were put up in each of the four local government areas.

The composition of the Labor teams reveals the degree of political involvement of the industrial workers and also the willingness of moderate Labor men to work with them. Nine of the twelve Labor candidates for the municipality of Wollongong were trade union officials. Among their number were F. Lowden and W.J. Penrose, president and secretary of southern district miners, and T. McDonald and W. Frame, secretary and assistant secretary of the Port Kembla FFA branch. In Northern Illawarra, five of the nine Labor candidates were communists. By contrast in Central Illawarra and Bulli the united front committee endorsed as candidates sitting Labor councillors, some of whom were declared Lang supporters.

The industrial workers were disappointed with the results achieved. Two candidates were successful in

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1 See Chapter Five, p.225.
2 South Coast Times, 7 December 1937.
3 Ibid.
4 Ibid.
Wollongong. Both men, however, were moderate ALP supporters who, in the past, had declined to contest municipal elections on a party political programme. Similarly, in Central Illawarra and Bulli moderate Labor supporters were returned. In Northern Illawarra, two industrial candidates were successful but they replaced retiring industrial aldermen.

There was a comparable degree of co-operation between the trade union men and Lang supporters during the 1937 federal election campaign. Wollongong trade union leaders expressed their confidence in John Curtin, the federal Labor leader. On the other hand in September 1937 a conference of union branches and mine lodges advocated co-operation with the Lang branches as a means of returning a federal Labor government. It offered Lazzarini 'moral and material support' and affirmed

...the urgent need for the defeat of the Lyons' Government and for the return of a Federal Labor Government pledged to support a broad programme of working class demands such as the 40 hour week.

1See Chapter One, pp.43-4 for a discussion of the attitudes of workers to municipal elections and of the reluctance of some who claimed to be 'worker representatives' to stand on a political ticket.

2The following were Labor candidates for the four local government areas. Where candidates were also union officials or held executive positions in ALP branches the name of the union or branch is given in brackets. Wollongong Municipality candidates; H.T. Fowles (FIA), W. Frame (FIA), J. Hayes (United Labourers), F. Lowden (Miners' Federation), T. McDonald (FIA), W. Penrose (Miners' Federation), R.F. Pinch (AEU), J. Powell (Boilermakers), J.W. Richmond (United Labourers), J.J. Kelly, E. Heininger. Northern Illawarra Municipality candidates; R. Allen, S. Beresford, S. Curnuck, P. Salmon, T. Silcocks, D. Smith, T. Street, C. Hester, A. Russell. Central Illawarra Municipality candidates; A. Jones, A. Lewis, J.J. Matthews (AWU). Bulli Shire candidates; A. Egan (ARU), T. Gibson, L. Kelly (ARU), C. Quilkey (Woona-Bulli ALP branch, president), E. McCarter (Woona-Bulli ALP branch, secretary). Successful Labor candidates were; J.J. Kelly, E. Heininger (Wollongong); J. Silcocks, T. Street (Northern Illawarra); L. Kelly, C. Quilkey, T. Gibson Bulli Shire; J.J. Matthews (Central Illawarra). See Steel & Metal Worker, 10 November 1937 and Illawarra Mercury, 10 December 1937.

3Illawarra Mercury, 11 June 1937.
a shorter working day for miners, Non-Contributory National Insurance and other legislation which will give greater economic security to the masses. 1

Individual unions assisted ALP campaign committees and industrial branches and urged a co-ordination of union and party efforts. 2 The unionists clearly expected concessions in return for this support. They once more unsuccessfully raised the question of a district assembly 'as a means of bringing the political and industrial sections of the movement closer together'. 3 Further, they were able to extract from Lazzarini a promise of more regular consultation with local union officials. 4

The trade union leaders were well aware that promises made by politicians before elections were of doubtful value, but their dissatisfaction was not so much with Lazzarini as with their state representatives. The uneasy truce which existed between the industrial unions and Sweeney and Davies became open conflict, as attacks upon Lang intensified. In November 1937, Wollongong trade union officials attended a conference organised by the Sydney Labor Council to consider ways of removing him. At the same time, Lowden called once more upon Davies and Sweeney to support those wishing to 'cleanse' the labour movement. 5

Politics was becoming too important to the trade unionists to be left to the politicians or more precisely to Lang. Their inability to defeat Lang by moves within the party left them with one course of action: to oppose Lang at the polls. It was this thinking which led Wollongong trade union leaders to join with other dissatisfied industrial groups and form an Industrial Labor Party. At the new party's inaugural conference in January 1938 E.R. Browne,

1Steel & Metal Worker, 24 September 1937.

2Illawarra Mercury, 11 June 1937.

3Steel & Metal Worker, 24 September 1937.

4Illawarra Mercury, 11 June 1937.

5Ibid., 26 November 1937.
vice-president of southern miners, was elected to its
provisional executive. Wollongong's unionist-dominated ALP
branches declared their allegiance to the new party. On
3 February the North Wollongong branch resolved that
Because the 'Inner Group' by its many acts of
maladministration and consistent policy of
disrupting and weakening the Labor Party has
caused extreme dissatisfaction within the
movement, and because of the corrupt methods
adopted in the holding of country ballots it
is impossible to vote the 'Inner Group' out of
office this branch has decided to fall in
behind the provisional executive elected on
22 January....

At Corrimal, Arrowsmith carried a motion that the branch
place itself 'in the hands of the new organising committee'.
Similarly, the North Wollongong branch voted to 'take all
future directions and suggestions from the newly appointed
general secretary, Mr W. Evans'.

On 27 February a conference of Wollongong unionists met
to discuss further action against Lang and to work out the
details of local organisation. The delegates began by
affirming the declaration of aims made by the Sydney
conference of 22 January. After declaring itself 'the only
true expression of the Labour movement in New South Wales',
the conference had voted to
...repudiate the 'Inner Group' which has
consistently pursued a policy of disrupting
and weakening of the Labor Party so that they
could retain control of the Party machine.
We declare that the fight we have undertaken
to cleanse the Labor Movement and remove the
'Inner Group' dictatorship will continue until

1*Common Cause*, 19 February 1938.
2Ibid.
3Ibid. Evans had been a Newtown council employee and was
associated with J.R. Hughes, the president of the new party,
in the socialisation units during 1931-2. He was prominent
in the Municipal Employees' Union. See I.E. Young, 'The
Impact of J.T. Lang on the NSW Labor Party, 1929-1943', M.A.
4*Illawarra Mercury*, 4 March 1938.
its personnel is expelled from the movement and the Labor Party is made the virile strong and democratic institution it should be.¹

The Wollongong conference then turned to the problem of establishing the necessary organisation to perform this task and elaborating general policy. What was proposed was a committee of thirty made up of an equal number of unionists and ALP branch members. To prevent the dominance of any one particular union group, each branch and union was to be limited to a single representative. On matters of policy the conference took a stand 'four square upon the traditions of the Labor movement'.² It then attempted to translate these traditions, as it understood them, into a seven-point policy:

(a) Reduction of hours in the working week to a 40-hour week. This can be achieved by greater Trade Union activity assisted by a virile Labor Government; (b) increased wages to offset rising prices; (c) a progressive policy to grapple with the youth problem; (d) a rural policy to assist the struggling farmer; (e) revision of the Arbitration Act to introduce Labor policy; (f) restoration of rural awards; (g) coal industry reform and other important questions.³

The finer details of these policy guidelines were to be worked out by the executive in discussions with Labor politicians.

It was in defining their relationship with the Labor politicians that the unionists experienced most difficulty. The main object of the industrial party was to seek the return of a New South Wales Labor government and, as they saw it, this could only be achieved by replacing its existing leader. They were prepared to oppose Labor politicians where this was in the 'best interests of the labour movement'.⁴ What these best interests were depended greatly upon local circumstances. Wollongong unionists were, however, uncertain

¹Ibid.
²Ibid.
³Ibid.
⁴Ibid.
in their attempts to assess the local political situation. Some were of the opinion that with careful organisation industrial candidates could defeat the sitting members. The opposing view was put by Sam Blakeney, a Corrimal ALP delegate. He agreed that Sweeney and Davies had alienated themselves from the trade union movement by their continued support for Lang, but considered that there was not sufficient time to prepare a successful campaign against them. A final resolution of the question was postponed by the appointment of a sub-committee to ask Sweeney and Davies again whether 'they would support the Provisional Executive'.

In the event of a further rejection the sub-committee was instructed 'to consider nominating candidates to contest both seats'.

In the negotiations that followed, Sweeney and Davies expressed agreement with the general policy of the unionists but were not anxious to commit themselves further. Despite this rebuff, the sub-committee baulked at nominating industrial candidates. There were rumours that F. Lowden, president of the southern district miners, would run against Sweeney, but after he publicly disavowed political aspirations the sub-committee announced that 'no candidates representing the Trade Unions and Labour Leagues opposed to Lang would contest Bulli or Illawarra'. Many unionists were disappointed with the decision. Most miners had resented the manner in which Lang had imposed Sweeney upon them in 1933, and there was reason to believe they might move against him. Moreover, the announcement that the non-Labor parties would not nominate candidates for either Wollongong seat removed any possibility of a Labor defeat. No reason was given by the sub-committee for its decision and there was no public dissent from it. Most likely they accepted the

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1 Ibid.
2 Ibid.
3 Ibid., 18 March 1938.
4 See Chapter Four, pp.186-91.
argument that the election was too close for adequate campaigning and that it was, therefore, tactically wiser to avoid a direct confrontation with well-established local members. It is possible also that they wanted unity as much as they wanted to be rid of Lang. Moreover, the 'big fella' still commanded substantial support.1

In the elections which followed Davies was therefore returned unopposed. Sweeney, however, had two opponents: J.B. Miles, a Communist Party official, and an independent candidate, E.J. Ryan, a local school teacher and president of the Bulli Shire Council. The industrial leaders gave no direction as to how unionists should vote, although they dissociated themselves from Ryan's attempts to present himself as an anti-Lang workers' candidate.2 In the event Sweeney won from Ryan with Miles running last.3 The anti-Lang faction was well pleased with the result. They calculated that the sizeable vote assembled by Ryan probably included some of the dissatisfied Labor supporters who could not bring themselves to vote for a Communist Party candidate.

Although the industrialists4 had hesitated to break with their parliamentary representatives they continued, nevertheless, to organise support for the provisional executive.5 While the election campaign was still in progress, the Corrimal ALP branch accepted a charter from the

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1 In an interview, on 1 June 1973, Mr E. Arrowsmith, the only surviving member of the sub-committee, confirmed these suggestions. He also said that the Communist Party was in agreement with this decision since it left them free to run a candidate in Bulli where they were confident of obtaining a reasonable percentage of the vote. There was, on the other hand, little to be gained from opposing Davies.

2 Illawarra Mercury, 18 March 1938.

3 The full voting figures were: Sweeney, 7,380; Ryan, 3,413; Miles, 2,731. NSW PP (1937-8), Vol.1, pp.552-3.

4 The trade union-dominated breakaway group was at the time referred to as the Industrial Labor Party. Its members were referred to as 'industrialists'.

5 The Industrialists ran six candidates. Two were successful: C.C. Lazzarini (Marrackville) and R.J. Heffron (Botany). The ALP won 28 seats, one fewer than that won by State Labor in 1935.
provisional executive. Arrowsmith, the branch secretary, declared that the action taken was consistent with earlier branch support for the socialisation units and advocated that the Labor party should return to this objective.\(^1\) The Wollongong North branch gave much the same reason when it announced support for 'Industrial Labor'.\(^2\) In the months that followed the election, most industrial unions in the district affiliated to the provisional executive. The Illawarra Trades and Labor council offered to provide administrative assistance and to promote the formation of further branches.\(^3\) To co-ordinate the activities of the branches and to ensure that they remained in close contact with the unions, a South Coast District Assembly was formed. Special provision was made for unemployed and relief worker representation on the assembly. By December 1938, new branches had been formed at Bulli and Coledale and members were able to claim that 'inner group contamination was confined to the Bulli-Woonona branch'.\(^4\)

With the establishment of the district assembly, the control of political and industrial labour organisation in Wollongong was in the hands of the unionists. This in turn promoted closer co-operation in the industrial sphere. United action on political issues was now more possible than at any time since the dismissal of Lang in 1932. This was

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\(^1\) *Common Cause*, 19 February 1938.

\(^2\) Ibid.

\(^3\) Wollongong union branches to signify support for the industrial party were: Southern district of Miners' Federation, South Coast Branch of the Waterside Workers' Federation, Australian Workers' Union, ARU (South Coast), FEDFA (South Coast), AEU, Cokeworkers. Individual mine lodges to send delegates to the Unity Conference in June were: Mt Kembla, Coalcliff, Wongawilli, Bulli, Scarborough. As well Corrimal, North Wollongong and the Port Kembla ALP branches sent representatives. See Minutes of the Unity Conference held 25 June 1938 (Labor Daily Print), pp.7-14; *Common Cause*, 2 April 1938; Illawarra Trades and Labor Council Minutes, 17 March 1938; South Coast Branch Waterside Workers' Federation Minute Books, 11 July 1938; *Steel & Metal Worker*, 24 September 1938.

\(^4\) *Daily News*, 13 December 1938.
certainly the view of Arrowsmith, now secretary of the
district assembly. In an appeal to fellow steelworkers, he
pointed to the industrial successes at Port Kembla and on the
coalfields as examples of what militant union action could
achieve. There was no reason, he argued, why similar
successes should not follow from concerted political action.
Indeed, local conditions made political action imperative.
According to his analysis of economic trends, another
depression was imminent. There were steps which workers
might take to prevent a return to the conditions of 1932.
They should demand legalisation to shorten the working week
and greater expenditure on public works to ensure that the
burden of the next economic collapse was not borne by them.
They should also agitate for further social legislation to
protect themselves from the vicissitudes of unemployment.¹

Arrowsmith's assessment was neither optimistic in its
prediction that united political action was possible, nor
unduly pessimistic in its economic forecast. There was
evidence at hand of grass-roots political involvement. The
new industrial party was one example, but there were others.
The campaign for better housing was political, and not simply
in a parochial sense. Housing reformers argued not only for
housing as a temporary and local necessity, but as a long-
term government responsibility to alleviate poverty
throughout Australia. The miners' demands for shorter hours,
improved working conditions and pensions were similarly
viewed as part of a wider political struggle.²

Moreover, the unionists' political programme was closely
related to workers' demands. Of paramount concern was the
development of a social insurance programme. Demands for
some form of safeguard against unemployment became more
insistent after 1936. The federal government responded to
these demands by proposing to amalgamate existing state and
federal legislation so as to create a uniform system of
social services throughout the Commonwealth. Trade unions

¹Steel & Metal Worker, 21 October 1937.
²Illawarra Mercury, 7 October 1938.
were critical of the government's early suggestions. Their principal objection was to the proposed contributory nature of the government scheme. Labour wanted the cost of such legislation to be borne by the government and the employers.

There was also opposition to a suggested means test and to a qualifying period before payments began. In 1938 the federal government introduced a National Health and Pensions Insurance Bill which offered a system of compulsory insurance for all employed persons on the basis of contributions from consolidated revenue, from employers and employees. It was to provide funds for the payment of age and invalid pensions, disablement allowances and for medical and pharmaceutical benefits. Wollongong trade unionists protested and demanded increased benefits and the inclusion of an unemployment benefit and the removal of the compulsory contribution clause. The Illawarra Trades and Labor Council appointed a committee to publicise the defects of the act. Opposition gradually gave way to qualified acceptance. Trade union leaders decided that, inadequate as the act was, it at least went part of the way towards meeting their demands. The legislation was, however, eventually abandoned, but for reasons other than criticism by workers. The government was unable to win the co-operation of the medical profession. Mounting cost estimates, particularly in relation to growing defence expenditure, strengthened the position of opponents to the scheme within the government. Ultimately the outbreak of war caused the abandonment of the bill.

A further strand in the political thinking of the new industrialist party was opposition to war. After 1935 the Australian labour movement began to define its attitude towards events in Europe and the possibility of Australian

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2 Illawarra Trades and Labor Council Minutes, 19 October 1938. (ANU Archives T31/7).

3 Manifesto to South Coast Workers on National Insurance (Mercury Print), 1938; Steel and Metal Worker, 20 August 1937.
involvement. At first, the only voices raised were those of the communists and their sympathisers. In taking this position Australian communists were responding to changing Russian foreign policy. In September 1934 Russia had joined the League of Nations in a move designed, in part, to postpone a predicted attack on Russia by Germany. Wollongong communists accepted this analysis and preached the immediate danger of a new world war in which the USSR would be the victim and Germany, Italy and Japan the aggressors. In this coming war Australia would, they claimed, side with the fascists.¹

To promote this view Wollongong communists, in March 1935, began an anti-war campaign. At first there was no strong response, although the coalminers made opposition to war and fascism the theme of their 1935 May Day celebrations. Lodge resolutions stressed the internationalism of the workers' struggle and the miners declared their 'solidarity with the workers of the world against Fascism and Imperialistic Wars, particularly [with] the German workers and their heroic fight against Hitler Fascism'.² Apart from these sporadic instances there was, however, no sustained concern with European affairs.

Events in Europe, particularly the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, provided new material for the anti-war exponents, and especially for the communists. The Spanish government was defended by the communists as a legitimate government of the United Front variety. They denounced the attempted military coup as a fascist uprising and urged that Australia should indicate its support for the Spanish government. Wollongong non-communist trade union leaders placed much the same interpretation upon events. T. (Paddy) McDonald, FIA secretary at Port Kembla, told ironworkers that the Spanish Civil War was a 'Workers Fight'.³ It was

¹For a detailed treatment of this change see Alistair Davidson, The Communist Party of Australia, pp.72-93; E. Andrews, Isolationism and Appeasement in Australia, pp.9-10.

²Illawarra Mercury, 3 May 1935.

³Steel & Metal Worker, 28 August 1935.
also, he pointed out, a struggle which held lessons for Australian workers:

The worker of Australia or any other country need hold no illusions of the fact that the employing class will allow a workers' Government to govern in the interests of the mass of people unless given mass support. In other words Capitalism will allow a workers' Government to introduce social legislation as long as it will not interfere with profits, and before the will of the masses of the people can be achieved we in Australia may be confronted with a similar situation of [sic] that which to-day is taking place in Spain.

The Illawarra Trades and Labor Council agreed with McDonald's interpretation and voted to support the Spanish Relief Committee established mainly by Sydney communists to raise funds and conduct propaganda in support of the Spanish government. At least two communists from Port Kembla, J. (Joe) Carter and J. (Jim) McNeill, are known to have fought in the International Brigade and reports in union journals of their experiences and of war atrocities kept news of Spain before the workers.

The issue of the Spanish Civil War became inextricably mixed with faction fights within the labour movement. Lang, through the Labor Daily which he still controlled, was equivocal. He made a parade of left-wing rhetoric concerning the Spanish Civil War, but supported the policy of Empire non-involvement. The Miners' Federation was uncompromising in its stand and declared that

We, the delegates of the Central Council of the Miners' Federation affirm our recognition of the fact that the fundamental cause of the present conflict in Spain is the determination of the European Fascist Power and the reactionary elements in all countries that the popular and legally elected Government of that country must be crushed because it stands for peace, democracy and progress and hence menaces Fascism's war plans; realising this we unreservedly condemn the barbaric brutality of the Fascist military forces,

1Ibid.

2Ibid., 21 October, 23 September, 18 November 1938; Illawarra Trades and Labor Council Minutes, loc. cit., 19 October 1938.
send our congratulations to the sterling
defenders of democracy, call upon the governments
of democratic countries to end Fascist
intervention, and pledge ourselves to do all in
our power to rally support for the workers and
peasants of Spain now in the front trenches of
the international struggle against reaction.1

Lowden and Browne, southern district representatives on
the central council, were consistent advocates of this policy
and their views were shared by the Illawarra Trades and Labor
Council. Their position was strengthened when the ACTU, at
its annual conference in July 1937, took a definite stand on
the issue of involvement or non-involvement in matters
external to Australia. The council saw the threat to world
peace as coming from 'German and Italian aggression in
Spain, German aggression in China directed against Russia,
and the domination of the Pacific and Australia'.2 To cope
with this threat the ACTU advocated the organisation of the
masses against war, support for 'Collective Security' through
the League of Nations and opposition to the re-armament
policies of the Baldwin and Lyons Governments. After the
ACTU statement of policy the Illawarra Trades and Labor
Council spoke out more strongly against appeasement and for
a collective stand against 'fascist aggression'.3 In the
same month the unionists won control of the Labor Daily and
were able to promote their views more freely.

The unionists' campaign won few converts for an
interventionist policy. There was rather a hardening of
anti-war sentiments, which found a focus in criticism of a
federal government decision, taken in 1937, to increase
expenditure on defence. Condemnation of re-armament appeared
to be in logical opposition to interventionist proposals.
The advocates of collective security argued, however, that
the technical problems of re-armament were inextricably linked

1 CCM, 8 May 1937.

2 Minutes ACTU Conference, 20 July 1937, pp.22-8. Cited by
Robin Gollan, work-in-progress paper, Australian National
University, 1973.

3 Illawarra Trades and Labor Council Minutes, loc.cit.,
30 March 1938.
with the political. Support for the strengthening of Australia's coastal defences and the increasing production of munitions should depend upon the political purposes to which each would be put. Collective security required re-armament but the re-armers could not be trusted. Accordingly, in Wollongong where opposition to re-armament proposals became an integral part of the housing reform movement, union leaders opposed increased defence spending on the grounds that it was being given priority over social reform and over the provision of higher wages for workers.

To Wollongong unionists these arguments were sharpened when, in May 1936, BHP's Newcastle plant started to produce steel cases for 18 pounder-guns and anti-aircraft guns. Suspicion of BHP was constant and widespread among Wollongong workers. Involvement of the company in re-armament programmes was viewed by workers as further evidence of BHP's scant regard for the welfare of its employees.1 The Reverend W.J. Hobbin was expressing this attitude when he wrote:

If Governments can find time for anti-human armament concerns and can co-operate with large industries in policies which enable the machinery of these industries to be switched over to the merchants of death, then that government needs to be told in unmistakeable language that it was elected to serve the people, not to be used as a tool in the hands of large armament firms.2

By 1938 Wollongong workers were more persistent in political action and possessed an organisational structure which could direct and publicise their demands. Leadership was given by the unionists, who now dominated the industrial and political movements. A series of grievances, some peculiar to Wollongong and others shared by the labour movement in general, assisted this consolidation. There were three major areas of discontent. The first concerned the need for legislation to improve working conditions and

1Steel & Metal Worker, 21 October 1938.
2Church Standard, 10 September 1937.
safeguard continuous employment. The second centred on the need for more attention to the social welfare of the districts' workers; the provision of better housing, pensions and unemployment benefits. Finally, it was considered that involvement in war would lead to further deprivations for all workers. These grievances were directed at state and federal governments, and at the capitalists whose interests they were held to represent. Opposition to BHP as the largest local capitalist enterprise drew strength from and helped to shape these grievances.

These political demands and deep-rooted suspicions came together in a dramatic way in November 1938, when Port Kembla waterside workers refused to load pig-iron bound for Japan. Their protest was against the Australian government's trade in 'munitions materials' with an aggressor nation which might turn on Australia itself. Fear of the Japanese and a belief that Australian defences were totally inadequate were common complaints of industrial labour in the late 1930s. Militants within the trade union movement had come to take a stand against any involvement in imperialistic wars. But, as the Japanese increased the tempo and severity of the attacks against China, anti-war sentiment gave way to fears about coming developments in the whole Pacific area. In 1937 Port Kembla watersiders claimed to view

...with horror the unprovoked and murderous attack of the Japanese Militarists against the Peace loving Chinese People & lodge an emphatic Protest and demand the application of the League Covenant be put into operation against Japan. Furthermore, we as members of the Australian working class are prepared to assist the Chinese workers in their fight against Fascist Japan.\(^1\)

Japan, however, was too important a trading partner, especially in wheat and wool, for many in official circles to

\(^1\)South Coast Branch Waterside Workers' Federation Minute Books, 11 November 1937.
treat her openly as a potential threat to national security. When the ACTU called for a nation-wide boycott of Japanese goods and an embargo on the exportation of scrap iron to Japan, support came mainly from the militant sections of the trade union movement, peace bodies, some church organisations, some intellectuals and the Communist Party.

By 1937 the central issue in trade with Japan was the sale of iron ore and related products. Newspapers weighed the financial rewards of the trade against the domestic need for materials currently being sent abroad, against the possibility of retaliation if Japanese offers to buy were refused and against the contribution which might be made to Japanese aggression by the continued sale of such products. The specific question of strategic materials came to overshadow all else after the Japanese entered into an agreement to extract iron ore from the rich Koolan Island deposit in Western Australia. In October 1937 the Freemantle Lumpers' Union refused to load a Japanese whaling ship, and in the following months waterside workers in various Australian ports declined to load 'munitions materials', in spite of assurances by the Japanese that scrap metal would not be used in the manufacture of war materials. Nor were they initially cowed by government threats to apply the Transport Workers' Act introduced by the Bruce-Page government in 1929. The act permitted anyone to obtain a licence to work on the wharves and provided a method by which employers could by-pass the unions. After an official threat by the government to apply the Act to the Sydney port, however, the Waterside Workers' Federation agreed to load all cargoes offering, but opposition continued, and was not significantly diminished by a government ban on the export of iron ore in May 1938.¹

The official reason given for the ban was that Australia had to conserve supplies of iron ore for her own blast-furnaces. Geoffrey Blainey, however, has presented evidence

to suggest other motives. According to his account, Lyons in a private conversation, in March 1938, with the general manager of BHP, Essington Lewis, warned that he would most likely prohibit the export of iron ore. He told Lewis that 'the Japanese base' at Yampi Sound would be very awkward in the event of war. In Blainey's view a ban on the export of iron ore 'was the simplest way to expel politely the Japanese from Yampi Sound and to conserve Australia's iron ore for future needs'. He concludes that 'fear of a Japanese foothold on an isolated Australian harbour was probably the strongest motive for the embargo'. But whatever the government's reasons for banning the export of iron ore, it continued to permit the export of pig-iron probably to make it easier for Japan to accept the major prohibition.

By itself, the existence of opposition to the continued sale of pig-iron to Japan, does not fully explain why Port Kembla watersiders refused to load the Dalfram, nor why they successfully resisted government coercion until 21 January 1939, at a cost to strikers of £100,000 in wages. Contemporaries either applauded the patriotism of the watersiders, or condemned the strike as the work of a communist minority. In 1939 Sir Isaac Isaacs, a former Governor-General of Australia expressed his 'unbounded admiration' for the watersiders and wrote

that [Port] Kembla with the sturdy but peaceful and altogether disinterested attitude of the men concerned, will find a place in our history beside the Eureka Stockade as a noble stand against executive Dictatorship and against an attack on Australian Democracy.

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2Ibid., p.471.

3Ibid.

4Ibid.


6Ibid.
Historians have subsequently attributed the strike to the propensity of maritime unions to strike or to the machinations of a communist leadership.¹ Such an interpretation is at odds with both the attitude of the Waterside Workers' Federation executive and that of the Port Kembla branch. In 1937 A.E. Turley, general secretary of the federation since 1928, was defeated by a communist candidate, J. Healy. Under Healy's influence, a conference of the union did establish for the first time a national policy, and obtained the promise of adherence to it by the branches. It is also true that this policy pointed to a greater acceptance of direct action. Throughout 1938 Healy, however, had grave doubts about crossing swords with BHP, as he feared this 'would give Lyons and Company an opportunity to rush in with some kind of intimidating action'.² In December 1938, by his own admission, he 'could not see eye to eye with the branch decision to strike'.³

Shortly after Healy became general secretary, E. Roach, who was also a member of the Communist Party, became secretary of the Port Kembla branch.⁴ Throughout the 1930s he had been consistently critical of official federation policy. He stressed the need for constant economic and political action to improve working conditions at Port Kembla and for the Australian working class more generally.⁵ Despite Roach's militancy, the Port Kembla watersiders did not have a reputation for industrial action. Indeed, the branch's

¹See, for example, I.E. Young, 'The Impact of J.T. Lang on the New South Wales Labor Party 1929-1943', M.A. Thesis (University of New South Wales, 1963), p.249.

²J. Healy to J. Lonergan, Tasmanian State Representative, Waterside Workers' Federation, 16 February 1938. WWF File, ANU Archives.

³General Secretary's Report to the 4th Biennial National Conference of the Waterside Workers' Federation of Australia, 15 September 1952, p.40.

⁴South Coast branch of the Waterside Workers' Federation Minute Books, 20 July 1937.

most striking characteristic was its weakness. This was due in large part to the construction by the Port Kembla industrial companies of their own jetties, which were worked by their own casual labour. The branch had constantly sought the help of the Illawarra Trades and Labor Council to compel the companies to concede preference to its members. In 1931 G.W. Sloan, then branch delegate to the Council, resigned because, he said, 'the council in no way functioned for this branch'. With some misgivings the watersiders elected a new delegate, but warned that unless the Council assisted the union to win preference for work on the company jetties they would withdraw from the Council. Before such a step could be taken, however, the Trades and Labor Council, a victim of the depression, itself ceased to function.

From its inception in 1915 the branch in fact had operated rather like a club to which admission was gained with difficulty and almost by hereditary right. The union secretary's brother operated one of the larger stevedoring companies and as a consequence those who sought change within the union were easily disciplined. Men assembled outside the stevedoring company's gate and

...a timekeeper or foreman would inspect them as you would cattle at a sale and select the men required, based on their capacity to work and the amount of money each had placed in his [the foreman's] mug at the local pub.

Selection gave a man the right to work a 23-hour shift, 8 a.m. to 7 a.m. the next morning shovelling coal, coke or iron ore. Upon completing such a shift many 'backed up' for another twenty-four hours and some were known to have worked continuously for seventy-two hours. Union officials made little attempt to ensure that available work was equally shared by all watersiders. G. Vardy, a Sydney watersider who came to Port Kembla in 1928, presented a picture of the union from the viewpoint of an outsider trying to gain entry into the branch:

1 Ibid., 31 July 1931.

2 Joe Howe, A Tribute to Ted Roach (roneod, n.d.), South Coast Branch of Waterside Workers' Federation.
Things in their branch are putrid and the officials stand for them, and any member who has tried to rectify things has been starved out. I can tell you that I have not averaged two pounds ten shillings per week while I have worked in this Port. A few members of the Branch are well to do and should not be working for a living, and I have told three of them that they should turn up trimming but two of them are relations of the stevedores and will take a job ahead of a member who is only working for a bare living.1

The increasing activity of the port after 1935 as industry at Port Kembla picked up brought renewed pressure for changes within the union. Port Kembla companies complained that an inadequate wharf labour-force was creating delays in the 'turn round' of vessels. In 1937 the firms asked A.E. Turley to intercede on their behalf and persuade the Port Kembla branch to open its books to new members. A special meeting of the branch was summoned to discuss this and other proposals. Port Kembla wharfies were sceptical and many thought that Turley was acting as an employers' emissary in an attempt to 'flood the branch'.2 They supported instead a counter-proposal, advanced by Roach which aimed at a more equitable distribution of available work. He suggested that men who had worked eight hours in the previous twenty-four hours were ineligible for further work until all who had not worked during this period were offered employment.3 A roster was subsequently established to implement this scheme for union members, and later a similar roster was established for casual labourers. On the question of admitting new members the branch moved with caution. Men on the casual roster, however, gradually found their way into the union.

The introduction of the roster was a considerable victory for the militants and paved the way for Roach's election as

1G. Vardy to A.E. Turley (General Secretary Waterside Workers' Federation), 28 October 1935.

2South Coast Branch Waterside Workers' Federation Minute Books, 15 March 1937.

3Ibid.
branch secretary. Moreover, the union became increasingly active with the admission of new and sometimes militant members. Among them were a number of ex-coalminers, the most prominent of whom was R. Allen. In addition there were some displaced waterside workers from Sydney and Queensland ports. But in 1938 there remained divisions and serious obstacles in the way of any projected strike action. Unionists viewed men on the casual roster with suspicion and the dispensing of work on the industrial jetties remained a company prerogative. The watersiders were therefore in a relatively weak position to sustain any lengthy stoppage, particularly a political strike. To be successful, any waterfront strike would require the support of company wharf labourers and this had not been achieved before, not even during the 1928 waterfront dispute.

When Port Kembla watersiders refused to load pig-iron aboard the steamer Dalfran for Japan, they stated that their grievances were political not industrial. Roach claimed that the watersiders were refusing to load the pig-iron because 'success to the Japanese Fascist militarists in China will according to their own statements inspire them to further attacks on peaceful people which will include Australia'.

The watersiders received the immediate support of the Illawarra Trades and Labor Council which resolved:

That this Council fully endorses the determined stand taken by the Waterside Workers Union, in the cause of peace by their refusal to load pig iron on the Dalfran for shipment to Japan for war purposes. This council declares that the attempt to export pig iron to Japan undoubtedly to be used for the latter's war of aggression against China, places the Lyons Government in the position of violating Article 16 of the Covenant of the League of Nations and clearly exposes the pro-fascist policy of the Federal Government.

1 Interview with Mr J. McKenzie, 7 June 1973, a casual wharf labourer in the late 1930s.

2 Sydney Morning Herald, 18 November 1938. See also Port Kembla Wharfies State Their Case, pamphlet, n.d., Illawarra Trades and Labor Council File, Wollongong.

3 Illawarra Mercury, 18 November 1938.
Day to day organisation of the dispute was placed in the hands of the council's combined disputes committee. The committee endorsed Roach's decision to restrict the work ban to the Dalfram and other work continued on the wharves. The federal Attorney-General, R.G. Menzies, made the position of the government clear in a telegram to Roach which read:

Referring to refusal waterside workers Port Kembla to load pig iron for shipment abroad, desire notify [sic] your attention to notice appearing in press of intended action of Commonwealth Government. Government's intention is on 6th December next, to apply Transport Workers' Act to Port Kembla and to waterside workers in that port and at the same time appoint licensing officer for that port. Notice action in hope that prior to date fixed waterside workers at Port Kembla will realise that their action is inconsistent with the principle of democratic government and will resume loading. In latter event notice will be withdrawn.

A stop-work meeting on 29 November replied with a unanimous decision to stand firm.

On 9 December, as he had earlier threatened, Menzies introduced licensing. But throughout the stoppage not a single licence was taken out. The government countered this continued defiance with the claim that the dispute represented an attack on democracy. Menzies and Lyons took the view that unions acted irresponsibly when they used industrial action to achieve political ends. The essence of representative democracy, Menzies asserted, was that obedience should be rendered to government founded on a popular vote. Menzies developed his argument further on specific as well as general grounds. If tolerated, the ban would establish a precedent whereby a section of the community could 'usurp the functions of Government' and constitute a conflict with 'the recognised principles of orderly government and international trading'. If the government allowed such action to succeed, then international pressures could be used to effect changes in other spheres.

1 Ibid., 2 December 1936.
2 Ibid.
also. Moreover, political strikes tended to disrupt the status quo under which the authorities were accustomed to operate.  

The principal strategy adopted by the strikers was that of non-extension. Rank and file militants demanded a general strike of miners and industrial workers at Port Kembla, but strike leaders made no call for such a move. McHenry was adamant that the dispute should be confined to the waterfront. He denied that the watersiders were on strike; they had simply refused to perform one specific duty (to load pig-iron), and they were willing to carry out all other duties. The government's introduction of the licensing system, not the action of the watersiders, had brought the entire waterfront to a standstill.  

This argument was presented as much in the interests of self-preservation as to embarrass the government. An extension of the strike to include the steelworkers would add a further 5,000 men to the strike list. Unionism at the steelworks had consolidated but, while steelworkers contributed to the strike-fund and refused to work the company wharves or shift pig-iron outside the plant, there was some doubt about their willingness to accept a long struggle with the government for a purely political objective. To widen the dispute to include steelworkers would have required a widening of the strike issues. Such a step, as the strike leaders well knew, would diminish the political effectiveness of the strike.  

During the strike, as throughout the entire controversy surrounding continued export of iron ore, and later pig-iron, to Japan, BHP's position seemed to its opponents, at least, illogical. Essington Lewis, general manager of the company, believed that Australia would indirectly strengthen her own defences by employing the profits from the trade in pig-iron, which yielded higher profits than did iron ore, to strengthen

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1 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 18 November, 22 December 1938.  
2 *Steel & Metal Worker*, 18 December 1938; *Sydney Morning Herald*, 18 December 1938.
her own defences. To many workers there was sufficient proof of collusion between company and government. Elaborating this view, McHenry alleged that BHP agreed, in May 1938, to an embargo on the export of iron ore from Australia, to reap the higher profits offering from the continued sale of pig-iron.

On 17 December, BHP made the move strike leaders must have feared, yet expected. Production, the company said, had been brought to a standstill by the waterfront dispute, and dismissals were inevitable. Within a week more than 4,000 men were put off. To McHenry and to the majority of Port Kembla workers these dismissals were incontrovertible evidence of the power of a 'vast monopoly owned by a small gang of parasites'. BHP possessed a stranglehold on Australian economic and political life. Though the strike continued for a further month, the economic implications of the company's move forced the watersiders to capitulate, and on 21 January they agreed under protest to load the Dalfram.

The Port Kembla watersiders eventually loaded the Dalfram but by their actions they had compelled the federal government to review its policies. Part of the reason for this success was that their stand was supported by many patriotic UAP supporters throughout Australia. It is probable also that some government members were belatedly coming to accept the need for such a ban. Equally as important in the battle to win public support was the ability of the Trades and Labor Council to maintain a disciplined strike body. Their organisation had been quickly built up after 1935. Militant unionists controlled the major unions, influenced the policy of the Illawarra Trades and Labor

2Sydney Morning Herald, 5 December 1938.
3Steel & Metal Worker, 18 December 1938.
Councill and dominated the political wing of the local labour movement. They were therefore able quickly to mobilise support for the watersiders. Apart from some initial difficulty with AWU officials who considered providing men to work company wharves, the leaders gained the full support of all district unions. Within a week of the imposition of licensing, the coalminers had re-established the area-committees used as relief and propaganda outlets during their 'second round' campaign. Railwaymen refused to handle scrap-iron, this effectively blocking any attempt to shift the pig-iron to Sydney for loading there. FIA officials guaranteed that their members would not work the company wharves. Moreover, the strike leaders displayed considerable singleness of purpose in their handling of the dispute.

They opened all waterside workers' meetings to casual wharf labourers and arranged to assist the crew of the Dalfram. Above all they refrained from overplaying their hand and rejected pressures to turn the strike into an all-out attack on BHP.

The militants may have controlled the institutions of the Wollongong labour movement, but when the man who symbolised the hated government policies appeared on the scene, the spontaneous anger of individuals could not be restrained – nor was any attempt made to do so. When Menzies travelled by the coast road to Wollongong in January 1939, to meet with the combined disputes committee, his progress through the coalmining villages was halted by demonstrators. Declaring the day a holiday, coalminers and their families lined the roadside in protest against the continued export of pig-iron. A crowd of 1,000 'men women and children' waited his arrival in Wollongong and barred his way to the Town Hall. The placards of the demonstrators reveal the diverse attitudes which prompted workers to support the

1 Illawarra Mercury, 9 December 1938; Daily News, 16 December 1938.
2 Daily News, 16 December 1938; Common Cause, 14 January 1939.
3 Illawarra Mercury, 13 January 1939.
strike. They demanded 'work and peace', 'homes not war' and that 'the question of Pig Iron to Japan be put to the people'. It was clear that the pig-iron strike was as much a social as a political strike.

It is difficult, in any particular case, to determine exactly the steps by which social discontent is transformed into political protest. Yet it is possible to follow a sequence of events in Wollongong which distilled from the general misery a series of specific demands for reforms in living and working conditions, and eventually led to a political strike. The Wollongong labour movement was itself shaped by the depression. Most of its leaders gained their initial organising experience and developed their tactics in the Unemployed Workers' Movement. The pig-iron dispute is linked with the struggles of the unemployed through the miners' campaigns for pensions and improved conditions, through the union consolidation at Port Kembla and through the campaign for improved housing. It was the work of Wollongong's 'depression generation' and involved in its ramifications practically the whole of a working class community. The unity of 1938-9 was the result of a regrowth of interest in politics as a means of achieving trade union aims first in industry and then in social policy. This renewed interest in politics paralleled union growth and in the pig-iron dispute unions demonstrated the inter-relationship by showing themselves to be a useful means of political organisation.

1 Ibid.

2 See Don Aitken, Michael Kahan and Sue Barnes 'What Happened to the Depression Generation' in The Great Depression in Australia (ed.) Robert Cooksey, pp. 174-82. They question whether the experience of depression influenced behaviour whether the experience of depression influenced behaviour then or later and suggest that the economic collapse of the 1930s may have 'tended to mute rather than exacerbate class antagonisms'. This view seems totally misleading for Wollongong.
CONCLUSION

The Wollongong labour movement was ill-equipped to meet the problems arising from the depression of the 1930s. Not only were the coalminers, who dominated the industrial and political wing of the local labour movement, confronted by an economic crisis within their industry, but the onset of the depression also took place against a wider background of disorienting social and economic change. Until the 1920s Wollongong had been essentially a rural-mining district. More than sixty percent of the district's male work-force depended for their livelihood upon the coal industry. The establishment of a steelworks at Port Kembla in 1928, however, marked a new era in Wollongong's history. Within a decade steel production had surpassed coalmining as the single most important enterprise and ironworkers outnumbered the miners. By creating new markets for existing industries and stimulating new ones, the steelworks established Wollongong as the third most important industrial area in New South Wales.

This transformation from a rural and mining community to a steeltown added a dimension to the district's depression experience. After 1928 the dominant social, political and economic forces were essentially the products of an increasingly urban environment. At first, all sections of the community welcomed the coming of the steelworks as an augury of better times. It was generally anticipated that the demand for coal at the new plant would assist a recovery of the local coal industry. Businessmen expected to profit from the increasing demands of a growing population, while all property owners were gratified by the resulting rise in land values.

Economic collapse, however, exposed the doubts and hesitations harboured by some sections of the community about the impact industrial growth would have upon local society. The inability of local authorities to regulate industrial and residential expansion resulted in haphazard, unplanned development and appalling living conditions. This obvious
social deterioration provoked a series of confused and contradictory responses from all sections of society. Local governments which, in the main, reflected the attitudes of conservative business and property interests grew more uneasy as they were called upon to assist the jobless who flowed into Port Kembla in search of work. Some local body members, like W.L. Howarth, the controversial mayor of Wollongong, reacted sharply and disclaimed any responsibility for the plight of all newcomers or outsiders as they often preferred to call them. In adopting this position they did not simply reject industrial society as necessarily evil or even undesirable. Rather they advocated an embargo on men entering the district until the return of better times.

In the early months of the depression this viewpoint had a wide appeal and was shared by local unemployed who saw newcomers as competitors for available work. It soon became clear, however, that the prime concern of many councillors or aldermen was to keep the jobless off the streets and if possible to isolate them on the outskirts of the community. The term 'outsider' lost its original and literal meaning and became a convenient label used by some local authorities to denigrate their critics. Such tactics were part of a wider and more ardent defence of the old rural-commercial order which formed an important strand in the thinking of Wollongong's New Guard supporters.

The accelerated economic and social change after 1934 highlighted the contradictory responses of rural and commercial interests to the transformation of local society. On the one hand local authorities, who had previously been inclined to regard the jobless as an unwanted drain upon their finances, came to see them as the nucleus of a reconstructed industrial community. Yet these views were tempered by an increasing fear that as the industrial community grew the 'slum districts' would spread and engulf adjoining areas. Some in official positions were more anxious to remove these unsightly blots from the landscape than they were concerned for the well-being of the inhabitants. Their outbursts against the humpy dwellers reflected, in part, the belief that an old order was being swamped by a new and less desirable society.
The conflicts produced by these social changes were expressed in the response of the labour movement to the depression. Like other sections of the community the workers had welcomed the new industries. Their doubts increased, however, as work prospects diminished. They came to see the deterioration in living conditions as an inevitable and offensive consequence of industrial society. Moreover, the belief grew among Wollongong workers that Hoskins were using the economic crisis to smash trade unionism. The subsequent almost total collapse of unions at Port Kembla seemed to establish the validity of their claim.

The coalminers shared this view and, although they possessed greater organisational resources than workers in the metal industries, they were in a tragically weakened position. Throughout the 1920s they had been compelled to come to grips with the problem that was later to absorb all unions namely, what policy could unions adopt when confronted with widespread unemployment. Most coalminers, whatever their public protestations, accepted the view of their officials that a prudent policy of co-operation with the Arbitration Court might be the wisest. They placed their faith also in the election of state and federal Labor governments which they hoped would revive and restructure the coal industry.

Despite the enormity of the crisis which engulfed the labour movement, trade union officials in Wollongong, as elsewhere, were criticised for accepting too readily the terms of their employers. According to this view, first put forward by militants within the unions and to some extent by historians, union leaders lacked the necessary foresight and administrative ability to accommodate themselves to so catastrophic a phenomenon as the depression. 1 Whatever the validity of these allegations in other areas they would represent too harsh a judgement of most Wollongong trade union officials. At Port Kembla, where unionists were confronted with the task of constructing a new labour organisation, concentration on the immediate problems of

1 See, for example, L.J. Louis, Trade Unions and the Depression: A Study of Victoria 1930-1932, passim.
union survival was all that was possible. The traditional strength of unionism on the coalfields, however, gave southern mining officials a stronger base. Fred Lowden, for example, was able to formulate long-term objectives and go some way towards realising them. His foremost concern was to keep as many men at work as possible, to arrest the decline in working conditions and to eliminate desperation strikes. Accordingly, he planned a holding exercise until circumstances favoured more positive policies. If he underestimated the probable length of this defensive period, many shared his error.

Even Lowden's rather limited policy depended for its success on vigilance at the lodge level. This was often not forthcoming. Officials at individual pits negotiated agreements with their proprietors against Lowden's wishes. Most lodges, for example, lifted the darg - a limitation of output which equalised available work between miners and prevented speed-up. At other pits men accepted overtime. Such decisions, as Lowden well knew, were hardly calculated to appeal to unemployed miners and tended to reinforce the latter's belief that there were now three classes - the bosses, the workers and the workless.

The improving economic circumstances after 1934 aided trade union recovery. But the successful reconstruction of the Wollongong labour movement between 1934 and 1939 was not based simply on an improved negotiating position. Rather it was the product of a greater degree of purpose and organisation. The Unemployed Workers' Movement was most influential in the formulation of these new attitudes and techniques of organisation by the unions. In effect the movement filled the vacuum left by the disintegration of trade unionism during the depression. It provided militants with experience in leadership and a reputation for defending the rights of workers which enabled them to win union positions. The movement also provided a point of contact between ironworkers and coalminers. The personal friendships forged during the unemployed struggles helped to break down formidable union barriers and assisted the creation of an organised and united labour movement from a struggling collection of separate and parochial unions. Moreover, the
new leaders possessed a view of the unions' role within the labour movement which went beyond the work-place. They saw more clearly than most that to achieve trade union aims in industry and in social policy, political as well as industrial action was required.

As a consequence the reconstruction of the Wollongong labour movement after the depression was paralleled by a regrowth of interest in politics. Wollongong workers had entered the depression with high hopes for the recently elected Federal Labor Government. The coalminers looked to Scullin to revitalise the coal industry, end the northern lockout on the men's terms and undo the work of the Bruce-Page government which they claimed had perverted the arbitration system. However, in power, Federal Labor was a disappointment. Scullin adopted the anti-Labour policy of imposing wage-cuts to stabilise the capitalist economy and failed to fulfil his promise to end the northern lockout within two weeks of being elected.

The drift of federal Labor policy towards retrenchment and budget-balancing led most workers to pin their hopes on the New South Wales premier, J.T. Lang. Partly under the inspiration of his left-wing rhetoric the depression produced a heightened political awareness. There were, for example, demands for a return to the party's ultimate objective - the socialisation of industry. Among coalminers in particular the socialisation objective was more firmly and sincerely held than by the ALP membership more generally. Nationalisation was held to be the only full and sound method of transforming the coal industry without resorting to alterations in wages and hours. Lang, however, became convinced that it was necessary for his own survival to curb the radical views expounded within the Labor Party. His expulsion of the militant element from the party decimated the local branches, provoked the disaffiliation of southern miners and increased the growing disillusion with politics and politicians.

The unemployed protest movement was a further reflection of the heightened political awareness evident during 1931 and 1932. The political implications of the demonstrations
are difficult to assess as men protested for different reasons. Many demonstrated out of frustration. Few advocated resistance of authority. With some justification many unemployed believed themselves to be the victims of repressive local authorities. The clashes between the demonstrators and local governments were, however, essentially parochial ones concerned to criticise the actions of local bodies and obtain some relief for the jobless. It was because of their defensive character that the protests received such widespread support not only from the unemployed but also from trade unionists. Yet the demonstrations and the responses to them did accentuate class antagonisms. The clashes between the New Guard and the demonstrators reflected in only slightly exaggerated form the growing divisions within Wollongong society. With the dismissal of Lang, however, the labour movement became immersed in a struggle between those who supported the New South Wales premier and those who saw him as a hindrance to the formulation of a coherent political programme relevant to the needs of workers.

After 1934, however, it is possible to trace the process by which this schism was healed and depression misery was translated into a politically articulate and conscious set of demands and priorities. The initiative in formulating these new goals came from militant trade unionists some of whom were communists. Union leaders saw existing political divisions as a hindrance to more militant industrial policies. The communists wanted to stimulate working class consciousness. These two initiatives converged in the united front programme of 1935-9. The degree of co-operation between communist and non-communist in the united front period reflects the bankruptcy of the formal ALP organisation in Wollongong. The united front campaign became the only effective means of organised protest on a wide range of issues extending from a demand for better working conditions, to the need for improvements in housing and living conditions, to opposition to fascist aggression in Europe. The degree to which political, industrial and social protest were fused was amply demonstrated in the coal strike of 1938 and most forcibly in the pig-iron dispute.
The role of the communists within the Unemployed Workers' Movement and in the creation of this new labour organisation raises the general question of their influence within the Australian labour movement. Rank and file apathy has been commonly presented as an explanation for communist candidates winning union elections. The communist successes of the 1930s have been attributed to the confused nature of New South Wales politics which allegedly made it difficult for union members to know the precise political colourings of candidates for union positions. Whatever the validity of these explanations elsewhere they are inaccurate for Wollongong. The communists on the united front ticket which was successful in the 1937 FIA branch elections at Port Kembla, made no attempt to hide their political affiliations. McHenry, who headed the ticket, had led unemployed protests during the depression and proclaimed his communist beliefs. He was known to his employers and to the police as one of Wollongong's most prominent communists. Moreover, he had also contested municipal and state elections as a Communist Party candidate before he became secretary of the Port Kembla FIA branch. Those ironworkers who voted for the united front ticket in 1937 knew McHenry's politics. Wollongong workers were not duped into choosing communist leaders, rather they elected individual communists because of their record of involvement in worker affairs.

The role of the communists in instigating and leading strikes has also been exaggerated by their critics. Southern district militants discovered, when they sought to put an end to rationing, that the depressed state of the coal industry placed limits upon the adoption of a consistently militant policy. Most coalminers accepted in theory the argument that rationing was not so much a humanitarian device to share available work as an attempt by the owners to reduce costs and increase production at the expense of the workers. However, when South Bulli miners sought its

abolition the proprietors presented them with a harsh option: rationing or retrenchment. The lesson of this abortive attempt to gain a measure of reform at the lodge level by threatening to strike was not lost upon the communist officials. Subsequently, to achieve the reforms in working conditions so desperately needed in the coal industry, they pursued the traditional policy of the Miners' Federation - recourse to arbitration backed by the threat of strike action. The latter course was followed only after careful organisation and after an extensive propaganda campaign both within the union and more generally. As a result the 1938 coal strike was one of the best organised strikes in Australian history.

The changing circumstances of the post second world war society - full employment and comparative affluence for some - have not yet obscured the tensions first apparent in Wollongong during the depression years. In some areas continued industrial development has simply aggravated the problems which confronted the community in the 1930s. The expansion of the steelworks has led to sustained population growth. The decision to recruit workers from southern Europe has not, however, been accompanied by better social planning. The migrants of the 1970s huddle in the unplanned industrial suburbs which were spawned three decades earlier to house the depression poor. The residents of modern day Cringilla face the same problems as the humpy-dwellers of Steeltown and the inhabitants of Spoonerville.
### APPENDIX A

**DISTRIBUTION OF THE LABOUR FORCE BY INDUSTRY, 1921-33**

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Classification</th>
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The classifications used in the census tables differ and consequently the figures presented in this appendix offer little more than a rough measure of broad trends.
APPENDIX B

PRODUCTION AT METAL MANUFACTURES, 1927 - 1936

Overall Production
Wire and Cable Production
Tube Factory Production
Telephone Cable Production

Source: METAL MANUFACTURES DIRECTORS REPORTS, 1927 - 1939
APPENDIX C

METAL MANUFACTURES LIMITED

AVERAGE ANNUAL NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES, 1919 - 1944

(As supplied by the Company)
APPENDIX D

POPULATION CHANGE IN WOLLONGONG, 1921-33

The following tables and graphs have been compiled from the 1921 and 1933 Commonwealth Census. Figure 1 gives the total population growth between 1921 and 1933 for each local government area in the Wollongong district. The extent to which this growth was the result of migration is shown in Figure 2. The vital statistics method was used to calculate the net growth by migration. The natural population increase is established by calculating the annual excess of births over deaths. The difference between the total excess of births over deaths and the total increase in population is the net growth by migration. The net migration figures obtained are inflated to the extent that the total number of deaths includes migrants. However, since the greater proportion of the migrants were in the 20 to 29 age group (see Figure 3) this is likely to have produced only a relatively slight exaggeration.

The tables showing the graduated number of males and females by quinquennial age groups for 1921 and 1933 (Figure 3) provide the raw figures for the series of pyramid graphs which follow. These show that the population influx was greatest among males in the 20-29 age group. See Chapter One, pp. for an analysis of these figures.

---

Figure 1. POPULATION GROWTH 1921-33

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<th>Approximate Percentage Increase</th>
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Source: Census of the Commonwealth of Australia, 1921;
        Census of the Commonwealth of Australia, 1933.
### MIGRATION TABLES

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(b) Municipality of Central Illawarra

### Males

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(c) Bulli Shire

**Males**

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**Females**

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**Municipality of Northern Illawarra**

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**Females**

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**Figure 3.** POPULATION STRUCTURE 1921-33

(a) **Graduated Number of Males and Females in Quinquennial Age Groups for 1921**

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<th>Age</th>
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<th>Northern Illawarra</th>
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<th>Bulli</th>
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<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
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<td>447</td>
<td>424</td>
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*Source: Census of Commonwealth of Australia, 1921, pp.550.*
(b) Graduated Number of Males and Females in Quinquennial Age Groups for 1933

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<th>Bulli</th>
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<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
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Figure 4. POPULATION STRUCTURE

(a) WOLLONGONG MUNICIPALITY 1921
(b) WOLLONGONG MUNICIPALITY 1933

PERCENTAGE

MALE  FEMALE

QUINQUENIAL AGE GROUP

75+
70-74
65-69
60-64
55-59
50-54
45-49
40-44
35-39
30-34
25-29
20-24
15-19
10-14
5-9
0-4

PERCENTAGE
MUNICIPALITY OF CENTRAL ILWARRA 1921
MUNICIPALITY OF CENTRAL ILLAWARRA 1933
(e) BULLI SHIRE 1921

[Diagram showing a population pyramid for Bulli Shire in 1921, with age groups and percentage distribution for males and females.]
(g) MUNICIPALITY OF NORTHERN ILLAWARRA 1921

PERCENTAGE

QUINQUENNIAL AGE GROUP

MALE

FEMALE
(j) AUSTRALIA 1933
## APPENDIX E

### BLACK COAL PRODUCTION FOR AUSTRALIAN COALFIELDS, 1925-39.

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**Source:** Mines Department Reports, 1925-40.
### APPENDIX F

**THE NUMBER OF MINES OPERATING AND MEN EMPLOYED IN SOUTHERN COLLIERTIES, 1926-38.**

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*Source: Mines Department Reports, 1926-40.*
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<td>10.8500</td>
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Calculated from figures provided in Mines Department Reports, 1927-33.
## Appendix H

### AIS Production and Employment Figures, 1929-39.

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<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Coal Consumption ('000 tons)</th>
<th>Coke Production ('000 tons)</th>
<th>Pig Iron Production ('000 tons)</th>
<th>Steel Ingots Production ('000 tons)</th>
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**Source:** AIS Annual Reports 1929-40. The employment figures were supplied by the company.
The following is the text of an interview with Mr Dan Timmins, Mr Len Boardman and Mr Harry Blacklock (26 February 1972). All three men were prominent members of the Unemployed Workers' Movement. Dan Timmins was born in West Bromwich in 1898. He worked in the coalmines before serving in the British army in France and Belgium during World War I. In 1922 he migrated to Australia and, after a short period in Melbourne, settled in Coledale. Len Boardman, born in 1899 at Stoke-on-Trent worked in the local potteries before joining the British army when still sixteen years of age. He migrated to Australia in 1920 but did not settle in Wollongong until 1928 (see Chapter Three, p.123). Harry Blacklock was born in 1901 at Bolton, near Manchester, and worked in the local cotton mills. In 1915 at just fourteen years of age he enlisted and served in Egypt for two years. He migrated to Australia in 1926 but did not find a permanent job until enlisting for garrison duty in 1939.

The combined recollections of these three men are valuable in so far as they provide an insight into how three avowed militants now view their depression experiences. Moreover, because of the remarkably accurate recall of events and the names of people involved in them, the interview is itself a testimony of the impact the depression had upon the three men.

Len Boardman:

We had to go in the old Council Chambers or Bulli Miners' Hall and in that period Steve Best was one of the dole officers and our people used to come up, and the dole officers used to, in some instances, when new applicants came along, interrogate them and ask them various questions and

I acknowledge the assistance of Dr J.A. Merritt in organising and conducting this interview.
hand them the dole and tell them they would be registered and so forth. This went on for quite a while and there were certainly many great arguments at that period, but no systematic attack on them. Throughout the Coast, some of the officers made complaints to the authorities that they didn't feel too safe and the police came over and took charge. Actually took charge of the issuing depots, one sat at the table and another policeman would be outside and another policeman would be inside walking around as our people came up. The moment they made any statement that wasn't acceptable to the Issuing Officer and said things back to the Issuing Officer, the policeman would step in and harass them and do all sorts of manner of things. This led, in one instance, to an actual fight between the applicants and the police, with some of our people joining in. This happened at Bulli and then our people had meetings right throughout the place on this question. And at this period with the police being there, many of our people were actually being refused the dole - that had been getting it. The result was, that our people had meetings and so forth and decided that they weren't going to play with the police. That the police have got to get out of these places.

For instance, one of the instances happened up in Scarborough. The officer there with the police refused to give two men their dole. One of the men who is dead now, by the name of Woods, and Checker Smith, were in front of the dole-keeper. I was with them remonstrating regarding their dole and so forth - their circumstances - and Woods picks up the stamp, the ink pad and the rest and he said, 'If you aren't going to give me the bloody dole, then no other bastard is going to get any'. And he threw the stamp and the pad and everything else over the cliff into the sea.

Harry Blacklock:

The point was, if the dole officer could not harass you enough he would leave the matter to the policeman and the policeman would ask you for some means of identification. I mean that some of the fellows were going under another name, getting dole, and I have had instances of fellows coming to me and asking could I hold three union tickets so they could get
the dole. But that was what happened. If the dole officer couldn't harass you enough he would hand it over to the policeman and the policeman would have the file and say whether you got the dole or not.

**Len Boardman:**

Not just these people that Harry is talking about now. No, the two men I am stating were actual residents of Wombarra - Scarborough. Had been for years, were well known and well known identities to the police and this was happening to locals, you see. Well, this started it. And then at this period questionnaires came out and our people decided the questionnaire should not be filled in because there were - was it sixteen or nineteen questions on the questionnaire?

**Harry Blacklock:**

How many?

**Len Boardman:**

Nineteen. There were a lot more, but these were the ones that had a lot to do with us mostly, were about nineteen questions and they went down right from whatever you had; whether you own your own house; whether you got any money; how many in your family; did you have any fowls; did you have a garden; how many children you had; what ages they were; whether one was working; where they were working; would they be able to leave home; would they be able to look after themselves; whether they suffered any illnesses; all manners of things by which our people could be deprived of the dole. For instance, a boy over the age of sixteen was not given the dole if he stayed at home. He could go and get work where there was some, or as we called it, 'carry a swag' from place to place looking for work. These were the things that started the fermentation and action which led up to burning of the questionnaires there on Slacky Flat, Bulli. Members walked from Port Kembla to Slacky Flat, walked from Helensburgh to Slacky Flat, Bulli and I can say thousands were at Slacky Flat. A bonfire was lit and an effigy of the Premier of New South Wales [B.S.B. Stevens] was burned with
all the police of the South Coast reinforced by a division from Sydney standing by waiting for action. It was a very close call during that period because, if the police had attacked, the unemployed had a Workers' Defence Corps which was fully armed with batons and other weapons of defence. This went off O.K. with the leaders and other members, prominent members, being picked up after the meeting had finished, put in gaol and arraigned in front of the Court. After this, further intimidations went on and this led up to the Bulli Riot. At that period many of our members were in gaol. I was one of them.

Harry Blacklock:

Well, from there we had a meeting outside the Bulli depot in regard to the questionnaire and the burning of it and the policeman on the table. I chaired the meeting across the road from the dole depo: and a resolution was carried that the dole be declared black. And nobody even offered to go into the dole depot, with the exception of a fellow named Anderson from Bulli who, rightfully I believe, was not entitled to the dole. There were two pickets standing on the door and the sergeant was standing there as well. Two pickets pushed this fellow Anderson back and the sergeant told him to go again. With the result the pickets threw him back again and Anderson grabbed one of the pickets. Another policeman stepped in, what was his name? - Constable Perry from Bulli. The sergeant attempted to pull his baton out of his pocket and somebody took it out of his hand and bashed him over the head with it and then a riot started just below the steps. I think the only thing that saved Constable Perry and the sergeant at the time was a pony and sulky there which got pushed over on the top of them. There was a constable inside, I won't mention his name, but he refused to come outside anyhow. After that they arrested a fellow named Jack Hitchen and bashed him coming up the street with the batons and the sergeant at the

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1 Boardman is here confusing the dole questionnaire of May 1931, with that of September 1932.

2 This is almost certainly true for Anderson was a Coalcliff miner.
time pulled his revolver out and threatened a bloke with powder marks on his face. And Dr Palmer, the doctor at Bulli, rushed out and said: 'Don't shoot, sergeant, for Christ's sake. They will kill you.' And with that they dragged Hitchen inside the police station and, we were led to believe anyway (and it was proved afterwards), that they bashed hell out of Hitchen with the batons. His head was streaming with blood. From then on the police came down from Sydney, the 21st Division, * the Basher Gang commonly known, and of course we scattered and they went around trying to pick the leaders up. That night I was in one of the fellow's houses playing cards with a fellow named Bobby Culbertson. He had powder marks on his face similar to this fellow the sergeant was goin' to poke his revolver at, and they surrounded the house and suddenly I heard the knock at the door and I said: 'This is the Johns', and I made out to go out the back and there was a policeman peeping around the corner and he said: 'It's no use running away.' I said: 'I'm not running away. I'm going to the toilet.' He says: 'Come here a minute. Weren't you in the riot this morning?' I said: 'No'. I said: 'I was waiting across the street as a matter of fact.' He said: 'I suppose you are one of these commos.' I said: 'Who said that?' He said: 'Well, I suppose you think you can use your fists.' I said: 'Ay, if somebody has a smack at me I'll have a smack back.' With the result this fellow from Sydney gave me a couple of clouts across the face and I stuffed my hands in my pockets, and Constable Smith came over and says: 'He wasn't in the riot.' And with that they pinched Bobby Culbertson and arrested him for this bloke who was supposed to have thrown some stones at the sergeant of the police, Standen of Bulli. This was a fellow with blue marks on his face, but from that on I don't know any more. They were going around the town trying to pick the fellows up. They went to this house at Thirroul that was being picketed and they raided the place. But from that there is nothin' more that can be said about that.

*This is almost certainly a slip. The 21st Division was formed after the second world war to stamp out thuggery in Sydney.
Len Boardman:

After the police had what they called cleaned up after the Bulli riots the Councils, under police mandate, decided that no further meetings should be held in the streets by the unemployed or by anyone associating with them. This then led to what became known as a Free Speech Campaign of the South Coast. Meetings were held in defiance of the police outside dole depots and so that the police would not be able to attack us we held the speakers in private houses or front yards. The speaker would be in the front yard of a house opposite the dole depot, be speaking from there, and the people would be standing around outside the dole depot. When the police tried to shift them they said that they were waiting for their dole, and that is why they were there, and naturally this did not last too long. The police in some instances picked us up after we finished the meetings for creating disturbances. This led then to us holding meetings in Wollongong, the corner of Church Street, meetings in Corrimal, at the corner of Station Street, opposite Green's baker shop, which led also to fights with the police in some instances, gaolings of speakers and speakers being dragged off the boxes. Also at this period there was the formation of the New Guard and the New Guard down here was very lively at that period. Dr Lee was one of the leading members. Other members were leading lights in the industrial sections here and others were members of the 'silvertail' groups as we call them down here. None of them was actually unemployed or actually basic workers. They used, if possible, to attack when a small meeting was on. When there was a large meeting they stood outside and taunted our people to try to get individuals so that they could bash them up. This was not successful on their part, so much so that at the corner of Church Street one night in October 1931 we held a meeting at the corner of Church Street near Globe Lane and they attacked. Some of our people were in the alleyway alongside Globe Lane and as they attacked, our people came out and there was a fight. They had weapons, and our people had weapons, including bicycle chains, batons and all manners of weapons, such as this. So much so, that the New Guard finished very, very disgruntled. Some of our people were hurt, but mostly our people that were caught
were hauled up into Court, Wollongong Court, and were placed in front of the Stipendiary Magistrate, Chapman. One instance that I would like to recall is this. A boy by the name of Kelso, he was about 5 feet 2 inches, one of the smallest of the people amongst us. He was arraigned and so much so that he could hardly look over the box in the Court. When he came out the prosecuting sergeant said: 'This man is a stormy petrel. He is a violent man. He is a man that has caused great damage to various people.' And he arraigned some of the New Guard as witnesses and these men were anything from 6 feet to 6 feet 2 inches. This man, for being so small, got six months in gaol. This of course then led up to a further meeting, in the late October or the beginning of November in the same place (at Church Street) at which Lawrence Sharkey, Bateman and local speakers spoke and our people walked from Helensburgh to Wollongong, Port Kembla to Wollongong.* The Workers' Defence Corps was brought out and our womenfolk were issued with a recommendation that all of them should have high heeled shoes with an iron tip on them.

Dan Timmins:

Or carry a long knitting needle or hat pin.

Len Boardman:

When this meeting was on, the speakers were placed against the wall of the Stadium (it was the Stadium at that period) and round the speaker formed the Workers' Defence Corps, outside them was the ordinary people and again in the centre was a ring of WDC, again the people and WDC, outside them. These men outside were facing away from the meeting. The police were there and the police were told that provided there was no trouble with the New Guard then there would be no trouble with us. Anyhow, the New Guard were amongst the people inside the two rings and when Bateman was talking the New Guard started to throw eggs and tomatoes. The police were issued with instructions that if they didn't stop them, we

*This is probably a reference to the address given by L.L. Sharkey as part of his federal election campaign in December 1931. Sharkey was the Communist Party candidate for King.
would stop them. The result was that the sergeant, when one man threw another tomato, was told that if he didn't walk in, we walked in. We walked in and grabbed this man and hit him as he was going to throw another one. The New Guard up in Globe Lane would not come out. They asked us to come out. The meeting finished and all our people, thousands of them, walked up and down Crown Street calling on the New Guard to come out, and singing the 'International' and the 'Red Flag'. That was the beginning of the end of the New Guard here. Some of the actions that were taken against them were their tyres were slashed, especially Dr Lee's. Other cars had sand and sugar put in their petrol tanks and their cars were dislocated in many, many ways. Other people that could not be got at like that were definitely taunted and definitely driven out of the New Guard. That was the position on the South Coast in 1931-32.

Dan Timmins:

But it was also at that period when they held meetings over the mountain. We had young boys up there watching who they were, who was in the New Guard and at the meetings. The boys were supposed to be hunting birds or just looking for mushrooms.

Len Boardman:

I'll tell you also what happened during that period. We got word that the New Guard was very, very good up in Jamberoo. So we then got a team of our people, over a hundred, and went up to Jamberoo when they were issuing the dole at Jamberoo and held a meeting up there and defied the New Guard to come out. This was done in quite a number of places and when the New Guard saw the South Coast was determined that they were not going to do anything, they actually buried their heads. That is what happened down here.

Dan Timmins:

In regards to the Free Speech, right after that there was really no trouble. The only thing was that every person who got up to speak his name was taken and he was told he was liable to get a summons or otherwise his name was listed.
It didn't matter what nationality he was or it didn't matter if he was a member of the Liberal Party.* He was branded as a Commo and his name was placed on the list as a Communist. Well, gradually it was overcome and the speeches were allowed to go on because it went from instead of having one speech a week in Wollongong we were going up to three speeches a week and it would have got more until the heat was called off and so it was allowed to go on.

Len Boardman:

I can remember at that period the arrests were indiscriminate. We were putting up stickers banning the Labor Daily which had turned against us. I was away at Newcastle at the time and I came back and the police constable came to my house where I was boarding and he said: 'You have been summoned here for putting up these stickers.' I pointed out that I was in Newcastle, but was arraigned in front of the magistrate and the magistrate said: 'Have you got any witnesses?' I said: 'Yes.' He said: 'What are they? Miners?' I said: 'Yes,' and the magistrate said: 'The miners will swear to anything. You can get fourteen days.' Another time, a man was arraigned in front of Chapman. Evidence was given, the man was asked: 'Have you anything to say?' The man said: 'Yes', and Chapman picked up the Sydney Morning Herald, read it until the man had finished, and then he said: 'I find you guilty and sentence you to fourteen days.' Those were the periods where law was not on the side of the people whatsoever.

Harry Blacklock:

When I first started getting the dole in 1927 and this was a matter of going to the police station at Bulli and satisfying the policeman there that I had been looking for work. It didn't matter where I had to go, I had to go and look for work. I was constantly harassed by this policeman at Bulli and even threatened to be put inside repeatedly, and I told the policeman he could put me inside as far as I was

*Presumably he means the UAP or Country Party.
concerned, he would still have to give me the dole and he would still have to feed the wife and kiddies, but it got on my goat that much that eventually I took to the track. I heard a job was going down at Kiama. However, I walked down there from Bulli and how I managed it I don't know, but I finally got down there and the Main Roads Board was calling men up. And I applied at the depot when they were calling the men up and the officer there that was taking the men on asked me where I came from. I said: 'From Bulli.' He said: 'Well, I'm sorry but this is only for men at Kiama, unemployed at Kiama.' I said: 'Well, look, will you sign my dole ticket that I have been round here looking for work?' He said: 'Why?' I said: 'Well, the police at Bulli reckon I am not looking for work.' He said: 'I'm not going to sign any ticket.' He said: 'Anyway, if the policeman has another go at you, you refer him to me, at the Sewerage Board and the Main Roads Board, and I'll tell him you were down here looking for a job.' Well, I was naturally thinking my wife would get the dole at the police station, but she went on the dole day and the policeman asked where I was and she told him I was down at Kiama looking for a job. He said: 'Well, I'm sorry I can't give you the dole. Your husband has to apply for the dole.' Of course I didn't know this while I was down there. I thought the wife was getting fed. Eventually I had to come back. I couldn't get a job, and found out that the policeman had refused the dole. But in the meantime one of our friends from Thirroul had been up to the policeman and played merry hell with him, until eventually he gave the wife the dole and I went to the sergeant then. Sergeant - I forget his name - anyway. I went to him and I said: 'Look.' I said: 'Why did you refuse my wife the dole?' He said: 'It wasn't me, it was Constable Becker.' I said: 'Well, I've been down Kiama looking for a job.' I said: 'I was offered the dole down there by the sergeant. I wouldn't take it on the understanding the wife was getting the dole while I was looking for a job.' He said: 'It'll be alright now, Harry. I'll see that you get the dole.' But he didn't know I had been to the local J.P. and the J.P. had got in touch with the secretary in Sydney and the secretary had had a go at the sergeant. 'Anyway,' he says: 'How are you off for shoes?' I had a pair of dancing
pumps on at the time with a big hole in the sole of them, so I picked them up and he said: 'you'd better come up to my place. I think we can fit you out with a pair of shoes.' And he also gave me a pair of pants. I must say after that happened, and the incident of the wife's getting refused the dole, I never got harassed by Becker or the police sergeant again. I did get the dole. It was only a ticket to 'run up' certain articles that were marked on the ticket. No tobacco allowed. It was good of the storekeeper if you could wheedle an ounce of tobacco instead of a tin of jam or something like that. That's the way you had to work your tobacco out, but we never got any money for the dole. I forget the exact amount. I think it amounted to twelve bob for the wife and I and four kids in groceries which wasn't very much. I know it went in a week and we were scattering round and pinching new potatoes from the Chinese garden in Hospital Road, and anything to substitute the dole.

The dole depots were set up about in the beginning of 1929. They were set up by the Government and local people, civilians, co-operative bodies, people who were well-known. For instance Best, the secretary of the Trades and Labor Council, White, president of a colliery lodge, and other people [were on them].

Don Tintling:

White was on the Central Council of the Miners Federation.

Len Boardman:

And other people were sent from outside. No police were in here at that period when the dole had come through and we have got to say this, never at any period was the dole sufficient. For instance, six shillings to keep a single man for a week and he only got these dole coupons. In Bulli for instance, they were sent to the Woonona Co-op and most of our people went to the co-operative society to do this and the co-operative assisted many of our people at that period and quite large amounts of debt were incurred with the Co-op by our people because, well naturally, our own people were directors of the co-operative society. This went on for a
considerable period and quite a lot of thieving went on because when the soup kitchens started many of our boys went down and got sheep from various places. One amusing incident I can recollect was of a New Guardsman who was a butcher in Corrimal, Ziems.* He had sheep and pigs and so forth there, and the boys went down to grab one of these and they had the pig alright, but the pig was squealing so loud that old Ziems came out with his horse and stockwhip and he was belting the boys with the stockwhip while they were trying to get over the fence. They didn't get any pig that night. But other places they did and this went on and it was shared by the people here on the dole. It was cut up and given out by the people that were on the dole. For instance, I myself like a lot more were doing work amongst the unemployed. Some days we would be living in various houses night after night, going from place to place. One night you would possibly get some lamb, maybe a bit of pork. The next night it would be a piece of dripping, just according to what meat had been got or what had been got in the house. Sometimes it would only be a cup of tea you would have in the morning and this was the situation. But there was one thing that I can say that during that period the people on this coast got together, stood by one another, had concerts, had dances and all in all were as close together then as in any period I have seen them since I have been in this district. I think you will agree with that, Harry.

Harry Blacklock:

Yes, we ran sports.

Dan Timmins:

We ran sports at Slacky Flat and we gave prizes to the winners. We collected £10 worth of coupons to buy the prizes. We had foot races, we had boxing and wrestling. We had all sorts of things at Slacky Flat and we made a good day of it.

* R. Ziems was an alderman in the municipality of Northern Illawarra.
Harry Blacklock:

I fully endorse Len's statement regarding the co-operative society at Wemona. I was getting my dole there and no matter whether your dole ticket had run out you could still go and get something. As a matter of fact, some of the assistants got into strife for handing out extra bread. If you wanted bread they would hand you a check to go round to the baker just round the back of the Co-op and you asked him for a loaf of bread and they would give you two checks instead of one and only book one down. Until eventually the manager found out about it and some of them was promised the sack if they didn't curtail this giving out of bread tickets. I ran a debt there of about twenty quid and I never managed to pay that off until 1939 when I joined the army - the garrison - and I was getting a bit of dough then and the wife was getting the allotment and I was able to wipe this debt out, which I greatly appreciated at the time because it had assisted us a lot in the worst part of the depression.
A. Personal Interviews

Mr E. Arrowsmith (committee member of the Port Kembla branch of the FIA during the 1930s and 1940s), 21 February 1972, 14 April 1973.


Mr D. Compton (South Coast Times reporter during the 1930s), 16 February 1971.


Mr F. Gray (staff-operator at Metal Manufactures during the 1930s), 4 May 1971.


Dr N.E. Kirkwood (medical practitioner in Wollongong, 1914-35), 1 December 1972.


Mr J. McKenzie (rigger at AIS and later waterside worker at Port Kembla in the 1930s), 8 June 1973.
Mrs J. McKenzie (wife of above, after 1937 a resident of Spoonerville), 8 June 1973.

Mr J. McLeod (coalminer at Coalcliff colliery), 7 June 1972.

Mr J. McQuire (coalminer at Mongawilla colliery), 2 February 1973.

Mrs Jean McQuire (wife of above), 6 February 1973.

Mr W. Mintorn (pay-clerk at ER & S during the 1930s), 2 August 1971.


Mrs N. Phillips (personal assistant to the Chief Engineer at AIS, 1928-33), 6 March 1971.

Mr T. Royal (coalminer), 10 June 1973.

Mr A. Speed (Coalcliff coalminer from the late 1920s), 27 March 1972.

Mr D. Timmins (South Clifton coalminer, leader of the Unemployed Workers' Movement), 4 August 1971, 23 February 1972, 8 June 1972, 6 March 1973.

Mr W.H. Woodward (railway employee at Thirroul, secretary of the Thirroul branch of the ALP, 1926-33), 3 May, 6 September 1972.

B. Miscellaneous Manuscript Collections

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Main Roads Board Files. Annual Reports of Industrial & Employment Office, 28/36; Industrial & Employment File, 28/83, special work for 1,000 Unemployed Miners; Industrial & Employment File, 28/58, road work on Princes Highway; Industrial & Employment File, 30/280, 28/26, 28/53. Held by the Department of Main Roads, 303 Castlereagh Street, Sydney.

St Luke's Women's Parochial Guild Minute Book (Anglican Church, Dalpo), 1925-35.

Strahan, F., 'A history of the Newcastle Steelworks'. Typescript in the possession of Mr F. Strahan, Melbourne University Archives.

C. Union Records

Australian Workers' Union Minute Book (Port Kembla Branch), 1922-31. In the possession of Mr F.H. Finch, 10 Wentworth Street, Port Kembla.


District Return Book (southern mining district), 1933-41. Wollongong University Archives.


Illawarra District Trades and Labor Council Minutes, 1936-42. Australian National University Archives, Deposit T31/7.

Miners' Federation Central Council Minutes, 1926-40.


Mt Keira Lodge Minute Books, 1926-9. Wollongong University College Archives.

Mt Kembla Miners' Lodge Minute Books, 1926-9. Wollongong University College Archives.

Mt Pleasant Miners' Lodge Minute Books, 1924-32. Wollongong University College Archives.

Record Book of Conferences and Meetings attended by the District Executive Officers on various matters. W.J. Penrose, district secretary, 11 April 1931 to 3 February 1936. Australian National University Archives. Deposit E165/19/2.

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D. Employers' Records


Essington Lewis Papers. Box 12, 14, 19 and 21, Melbourne University Archives.

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