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Editorial

Howard Guille, Ross Gwyther and Bob Russell

This issue of the Queensland Journal of Labour History comes just after various commemorations of the start of the First World War and before what could well be an overweening ANZAC Day in 1915. Australia entered the First World War as part of the British Empire. The declaration of war by the British Government on 5 August 1914 covered the Empire and committed Australia.

In a curiosity of history, the declaration of war occurred during the campaign for the first-ever double dissolution election in Australia held on 5 September 1914. The two main parties gave unquestioned support to Britain. The leader of what was then termed the Liberal Party, Prime Minister Joseph Cook said, *Whatever happens, Australia is part of the Empire right to the full. When the Empire is at war, so is Australia at war.* Labor Party leader, and soon to be Prime Minister, Andrew Fisher said *'Australians will stand beside our own to help and defend her to our last man and our last shilling'*.

Australia opened its war on 5 August 1914 firing an artillery piece from Port Nepean at a German merchant ship trying to leave Port Phillip Bay.

The first Australian expeditionary force invaded and captured Rabaul on 11 September 1914 and then took over German New Guinea. In a way, this reprised the formal annexation of New Guinea to Queensland made in 1883 that was then 'disallowed' by the British government.

Of about 416,000 Australians who served, about 60,000 were killed and another 152,000 were wounded. The casualty rate was one of the highest of the empire countries who committed troops; the death rate was around 1.4 per cent of the total population.

These were lower than for the European countries. Eight million of the sixty million European military personnel, were killed, seven million were permanently disabled and fifteen million were seriously injured. Germany lost 15.1 per cent of its active male population, Austria-Hungary lost 17.1% per cent and France lost 10.5 per cent.

One estimate is that the direct cost of the war to Australia was £377 million. The Australian War Memorial estimates the costs of repatriation and demobilisation were £238 million to 1935. Another

estimate puts the total long run costs including debt interest and sinking fund charges at £831 million. The annual gross domestic product for Australia over the war years averaged £585.5 million so the direct cost of the war was about two-thirds the annual product and the long-term costs 1.4 times. At Versailles, Australia received £5.6 million in reparations: the war was a poor economic investment!

These stark memories of foreign wars obscure the wars that happened in nineteenth century Queensland. For example, at a very local level, Thorpe in his colonial history of Queensland reports on a “*systematic but less well-known military campaign*” on Moreton Island with orders to sweep the island from end to end and kill all the males. The effect, some years later, was that there were no men over 35 years old.

In a very important paper presented in July this year, Raymond Evans & Robert Ørsted-Jensen have estimated that 66,680 Aboriginal people were killed in 40 years of dispersals and frontier wars in Queensland in the nineteenth century. On this basis, more Aboriginal people were killed in the Queensland wars than the total deaths of Australians in World War I.

In the authors’ laconic words, ‘*Students of World War One will also notice that the figure of 66,680 is remarkably close to the Australian combat death rate of 62,300 in that war*’.¹ This is

truly shocking; the writers deserve the strongest thanks and support and their findings the widest possible circulation.

At the time of writing, the Australian Government is committing air crews to Iraq-Syria and there is talk of meeting a ‘general request’ for assistance from the United States.. Perhaps little has changed, Australia still follows the ‘leader’ except we wait for call from Washington not Westminster.

We should remember. In the words of US socialist of the Eugene Debs from his 1915 appeal “*Never Be A Soldier*”, ‘*The working man who turns soldier today becomes the hired assassin of his capitalist master*’. Or in the words of German Expressionist, Otto Dix

*What is this war? It is mud,
trenches, blood, rats, lice,
bombs, pain, barbed wire,
decaying flesh, gas, death, rain,
cats, tears, bullets, fear and a
loss of faith in all that we once
believed in.*

Much of this issue tells us something about reactions to previous wars. Andrew Bonnell documents the serious opposition mounted by German workers and the rank and file of the Social Democratic Party to German involvement in the First World War. Rowan Cahill takes apart the right-wing accounts, particularly by Hal Colebatch, that demonises the union leaderships and the CPA for industrial

disputation during World War II. This is the written version of Rowan's 2104 Alex McDonald lecture.

Valerie Cooms is an Indigenous scholar who tells us how international pressure, especially from the United Nations, shamed the Menzies Government to take some action against the racist and discriminatory legislation of the Queensland Government. She points out that in World War II, 'Aboriginal men who enlisted as servicemen in the 1940s were only paid 1/3 of the wages of non-Aboriginal men'. At the same time, and well into the 1960s and even 70s, the Queensland government confiscated the wages of Aboriginal workers.

The themes covered by Cahill and Cooms echo in Greg Mallory's review of Doug Jordon's book about the CPA and unions especially about 'the role communist party union officials played in trying to develop the political dimension in the areas of peace, migrants and aboriginal rights'. The same themes underpin Ynes Sanz's review of Eddie Clarke's *History of the Queensland Council for Civil Liberties*. Both the history and the review are meticulous.

In 2014, we need to be vigilant about another Australian Government taking us to another war. We also need to be vigilant about a Queensland Government taking away the rights of freedom of association through its

VLAD Act and, it seems, overriding the native title rights of the Quandamooka people by legislation in favour of a sand-mining company.

Note

- 1 Evans, Raymond and Ørsted-Jensen, Robert, 'I Cannot Say the Numbers that Were Killed': Assessing Violent Mortality on the Queensland Frontier (2014). Available at SSRN: <http://ssrn.com/abstract=2467836> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2467836>



Max Pechstein, The National Assembly is the cornerstone of the German Socialist Republic, 1918