

Papers in Labour History No. 5, April 1990, ISSN 1030-6218

PAPERS IN LABOUR HISTORY

NO. 5

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Perth Branch

Australian Society for the Study of Labour History

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Acknowledgements

As well as those listed above who contributed to this edition acknowledgement is due to fellow workers who made suggestions, typed, proofread and supported the publication; Lorna Fitch, Penny Fayle, V. Helene Cartwright. *Papers in labour History No.5*, is available from the Office of the Department of Industrial relations, University of western Australia for \$10.00. It is anticipated that *Papers in Labour History No.6*, will be available for a similar cost in November 1990. Correspondence and proposed contributions should be addressed to The Editors, *Papers in Labour History*, Department of Industrial Relations, University of Western Australia, Nedlands, WA 6009.

Papers in Labour History seeks to publish material of a serious nature about the historical development of the Labour Movement, with particular emphasis on Western Australia. It is intended to carry a balance of contributions from students and veterans of the Labour Movement. Naturally this raises controversial issues and no apology is made for the fact that few readers will be able to agree with all the views expressed here. While the editors have made suggestions regarding each of the contributions these have been of a stylistic nature and have not been intended in any way to interfere with the expression of the views of the authors.

This edition of *Papers in Labour History* carries the second part of Gil Barr's story, as told to Stuart Reid. Gil talks about his years as an A.W.U. Organiser in the north west. The third and final part of his story will appear in the next issue. Bobbie Oliver's article deals with a long forgotten part of Western Australia's labour history, the rise and fall of the One Big Union just after the end of World War One. Peter McGann's contribution recovers the history of the 'Malay' pearling divers who worked off the North-West coast in the later nineteenth century. Laurie Burns brings us back to the present with his analysis of a strike picket by women cleaners at the Safety Bay High School in 1987. Joan Brenton-Coward explores the lives and union affiliations of workers on the railway permanent way earlier this century. We have one report, Vic William's account of a very successful Eureka anniversary celebration held in December last year. An account of the 50th anniversary celebration, when 5000 people marched through Perth's streets may be published in the next issue. Finally Dr. Sally Kennedy of the Arbitration Commission reviews Michael Hess's recent history of the Miscellaneous Workers' Union.

It is sometimes difficult to find enough articles for a journal such as *Papers in Labour History*. The editors wish to urge anybody who would like to write an article of reminiscence in print about their experiences in the labour movement or the workplace to do so and send their contributions to the editors. As usual we would be very interested to receive feedback from readers of the pieces we have published. We also wish to draw reader's attention to the list of sponsors, whose names appear on the inside of the front cover and we thank them for their continued support.

"...For Only by the OBU Shall Workmen's Wrongs be Righted"
A Study of the One Big Union Movement In Western Australia, 1919 to 1922

Bobbie Oliver†

The ideology of industrial unionism pre-dated World War I. Developed by the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), it stressed the need for workers to organise into One Big Union (OBU) and to resort to direct action, rather than arbitration, as a means of settling industrial disputes. This paper examines the development and subsequent failure of the OBU movement in Western Australia during the years 1919 to 1922. The OBU movement is significant in Westralian history for several reasons. Its commitment to direct action showed a growing lack of confidence in the Arbitration Court's capacity to do justice to the worker and to deal impartially with each union. There had always been disagreement over the methods of achieving reforms. Those who favoured direct action claimed that the Arbitration Court was in league with the "bosses", whilst those who objected to direct action sometimes did so because they feared it was a cloak for "Bolshevik" activities. The reaction to the firewood cutters strike, described later in the paper, is a typical example of the latter attitude.

Some of the most vocal advocates of one big unionism were IWW members who had suffered persecution and imprisonment under the War Precautions Act. They believed that only by developing one strong union to fight for the worker's cause, could such oppression be prevented from occurring again. During World War I, over 100 IWW members across the nation were sentenced to imprisonment on charges including arson and conspiracy. In December 1916 the Federal Parliament passed the Unlawful Associations Act, under which legislation membership of the IWW was an offence punishable by imprisonment for up to six months. The most notorious trial was that of the so-called "Sydney Twelve" (all of whom were sentenced to terms ranging from five to fifteen years in prison). Arrests followed in Perth and Broken Hill. Twelve Westralian IWW members were charged and tried.¹ In January 1918 a further five members stood trial in the Supreme Court in Perth on charges of conspiracy under the War Precautions Act. The four goldfields workers - Alfred Callanan, M. Yates, T.

Hawken and William Johnstone - were acquitted, but T.P. Candish, a member of the Carpenters' Union and of the ALF Fremantle District Council, was charged with conspiracy, not under the War Precautions Act but under the Criminal Code, was convicted, and served six months in prison.² Even though acquitted, some of the IWW members were blacklisted by employers, whilst others were kept under surveillance by employers and police.³ The IWW as an organisation was effectively crushed by the prosecutions following the institution of the Unlawful Associations Act, but the ideology of industrial unionism lived on in the OBU movement.

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Supporters of the OBU came from a much wider spectrum of political thought than the IWW, and included Labor and Socialist party members. The main impetus came from the most populous states of Victoria and New South Wales. In Victoria the movement was led by the Socialists who planned to establish a Victorian Labor Union consisting of 12 Industrial Departments, controlled by a 36-member Central Council.⁴ Frank Hyett, a friend and colleague of John Curtin, then editor of the *Westralian Worker*, wrote a three-page defence of the OBU scheme in which he argued that the Industrial Labor movement lacked industrial power, was inefficient, and was "utterly inadequate, as an instrument, to accomplish either permanent and satisfactory progress under the wage system (capitalism) or the abolition of that system." The creation of the VLU would end domination by craft unions, and establish a common industrial policy.⁵ The Workers Industrial Union of Australia (WIU), founded in Sydney by Jock Garden, Secretary of the Trades and Labor Council, made a concerted effort to attract returned soldiers. In a Manifesto, written specifically to ex-servicemen, Garden pointed out that the "capitalist" press had been used to "try and divide the soldier and the worker". The only means to redress the evils of "profiteering" and "economic piracy" which had sprung up during the war was through "strong and effective industrial organisation". Only the WIU, he wrote, was powerful enough to ensure a "decent livelihood" for workers and put an end to profiteering.⁶

Many who had fought against conscription during the war were drawn to the OBU movement, a point not lost on the military authorities. In Western Australia, Don Cameron "typified" the Military Censor's image of an OBU advocate even though he had never belonged to the IWW. Cameron was one of the Australian Labor Federation (ALF) State Executive's seven-member committee which was formed in January 1918 to draft a proposal for amalgamating the state's unions. Another member of the Committee was A.J. Watts, State Secretary of the Australian Workers' Union (AWU),⁷ a significant choice in the light of later struggles between supporters of his union and the OBU. Cameron was already under the surveillance of the military authorities because of his anti-conscription activities and his association with Mick Sawtell, an IWW member, and with T.J. Miller, Victorian Secretary of the anti-conscriptionist Australian Freedom League.⁸ The Censor observed, after reading intercepted correspondence, that Cameron and Sawtell and "others of their ilk" viewed the "capturing of [the] returned soldiers or even a portion [of them] as a deciding factor in accomplishing their revolutionary aims, and the most strenuous efforts are being made (and with some little success in that direction)." This comment indicates a genuine fear on the part of the military authorities that large numbers of returned soldiers would adopt the ideology of the Labor militants and would be a deciding factor in bringing about a "Bolshevik" revolution.⁹ Early in 1919, however, Cameron was appointed Organiser to the Victorian Socialist Party, and he ceased to take an active part in the affairs of the Westralian Labor Movement.¹⁰

The importance of "capturing" the vote of returned soldiers to the OBU Movement was similarly stressed by the Melbourne Censor. In a January 1919 report on the WIU, he warned that there were "roughly 200,000 men to return within the next 18 months, and it will be in that time that the life or death of the OBU Scheme will be decided. The writer has an uncanny feeling that this is more than coincidence."¹¹ Another military intelligence report stated that part of the task of the Sydney-based OBU Propaganda League was to link returned soldiers in Queensland with the industrial movement.¹² The IWW was powerful in Queensland in 1918-19, a fact which set that state apart from southern and western Australia where the organisation had been effectively crushed by the imprisonment of its leaders. There were said to be 52 IWW activists at the Townsville Meatworks alone. The historian, Ray Evans observed, however, that despite the ranks of unemployed being swelled by returned soldiers, and the efforts of the radical speakers on the Brisbane Domain each Sunday, and of the militant wing of the Labor movement among the miners, railway men, canecutters, shearers and meat workers, "it was the anti-revolutionary crusade which was gathering a large army of converts".¹³ Even in the state where the IWW remained strong, therefore, the majority of returned soldiers were attracted to conservative political movements rather than adopting the Bolshevism which Intelligence reports so frequently regarded as their inclination.

While the military authorities expressed alarm at the prospect of the OBU movement "capturing" returned soldiers, they also made their own plans. At a secret conference on 18 January 1919, attended by the Acting Prime Minister, William Watt; the Police Commissioners of New South Wales and Victoria, and the Chief of General Staff, J.G. Legge, the latter suggested reorganising the military forces in order to combat "revolutionary action". Legge thought that the most appropriate type of fighting force would be small groups of "picked men" with machine guns, and "a few aeroplanes with improvised bombs". He also advocated recruiting "special mounted constables".¹⁴ Although he did not specifically state that these recruits should be returned soldiers, there seems little doubt that he referred to men with military training. His suggestions were not acted upon by the New South Wales government.

The year 1919, therefore, saw a battle for the hearts and minds of ex-soldiers as well as workers. In the same month as Legge's secret conference, the All Australian Trade Union Conference met in Melbourne and adopted the Preamble and Rules of the WIU. Western Australia was represented by H. Gibson and E.H. Barker. The Preamble stated that class struggle was caused by capitalists owning the means of production. There would be "no peace" as long as want and hunger existed among the working people. The struggle must continue until capitalism was abolished, and this end would be achieved only when workers united in one organisation and took hold of the means of production by revolutionary and political action. "Revolutionary" was defined as "action to secure a complete change"; that is, the abolition of class ownership of the means of production, whether privately or through the state, and "the establishment in its place of social ownership by the whole community". An

eight-tier structure was proposed for the management of the WIU, commencing at the local level with "sections" and "district committees", and culminating in a "grand council" headed by an elected President and General Secretary.¹⁵ This was a more complex structure than an earlier proposal that the OBU consist of unions, group councils and a central committee, which was similar to the ALF in Western Australia where unions were affiliated to District Councils whose representatives served on the State Executive.¹⁶

The Preamble was adopted only after considerable discussion, and even then not unanimously, as the South and Western Australian delegates voted against it because they felt it was open to too many interpretations. Furthermore, the election of office bearers threatened to be an extraordinarily protracted and cumbersome affair. The issue of local autonomy also caused considerable debate. Barker queried the structure of the OBU which appeared to be "ruled from the top by officials". He was unconvinced by the opinion that "only by discipline and control by the officials and strict adherence to their instructions on industrial action could success be achieved". Such a structure, he thought, seemed to bear little resemblance to democracy.¹⁷ Despite his reservations, however, Barker firmly believed in the concept of the OBU, but others within the Labor movement actively opposed it. F.W. Birrell, the President of the Adelaide Trades and Labor Council, who produced a leaflet describing the failure of "One Big Unionism" in Canada and warning that if such methods were adopted in Australia, they must "surely end in similar industrial disaster", with its leaders being imprisoned. The Central Executive of the Queensland ALP repudiated IWW doctrine in an "Official Manifesto" in March 1919.¹⁸

The struggles and disagreements threatening to divide the movement in the eastern states were replicated when the Westralian Branch of the ALF gathered for its tenth Labor Congress in June 1919. A motion by George Callanan to adopt the OBU preamble provoked great dissension. Although the delegates agreed on the principle of one union, it soon became obvious that there were serious differences of opinion on which form the organisation should take. J.P. Doheny moved an amendment that the preamble be replaced by an objective "to bind together into one organisation all industrial workers in Australia, to achieve economic freedom by political and industrial action". In the ensuing discussion some delegates expressed the belief that the AWU structure and title should be retained as a basis for the one union, whilst others argued in favour of a completely new organisation. Even some of the latter objected to the phrasing of the preamble which had been carried at the Melbourne Conference earlier in the year. These objections centred around the use of the word "revolution", with its connotations of violence and bloodshed; the "American phraseology" which suggested an "imported movement"; the OBU's insistence on direct action rather than arbitration, and its condemnation of craft unionism. Other criticisms were levelled at the "autocratic" constitution of the OBU. J.J. Kenneally, of the Locomotive Engine Drivers, Firemen and Cleaners Union, stated that "blind acceptance of the preamble and the constitution" would not advance the creation of one

big union. Alex McCallum, the ALF State Secretary, disliked the similarity between the OBU preamble and the IWW's ideology "which had done no good to trade unionism anywhere in the world, but had lived on [its] destruction..."¹⁹ Defenders of the preamble justified the use of the term "revolution". Mrs Coates said that revolution did not mean "bayonets and blood, but quiet education". Percy Trainer maintained that the "originality or otherwise of the preamble" was irrelevant: the important question was whether it expressed the truth regarding the class war. He believed that it did.²⁰

Some delegates expressed disillusionment with the AWU. Both Mrs Coates and Miss Greenough, of the Women's Labor Union, felt that the AWU had "ignored women workers and had "failed to educate the wives and daughters of the workers to an appreciation of their economic situation". Andrew Clementson saw in the condemnation of craft unionism the strength of the OBU, so he opposed Doheny's amendment.²¹ Another delegate, Fred Baglin, objected to the amendment because the AWU had not made any guarantee to alter its Constitution "in accordance with the wishes of this Congress". He pointed out that "thousands of workers in Australia could not join the AWU under its present constitution." Furthermore, the AWU was "pledged to a policy of arbitration" which he believed had failed.²²

Among the defenders of the AWU were its officers A.J. Watts, Thomas Butler, Michael Costello and James Hickey, and Alex McCallum. Butler reminded the Congress that, in the 1890s, the union's founders "went to jail for their principles, and some were even shot for them". He challenged the OBU's supporters to give concrete examples of "conservatism" in the AWU's constitution. The AWU had "borne the brunt of five years of strikes to save unionism in Australia" and had used its funds to fight the 1916 and 1917 referenda campaigns and rid the nation of the "curse of conscription". Costello and Hickey defended the AWU's record in achieving gains for women workers. Others advocated building on the already existing base, rather than abolishing the AWU and beginning anew.²³ Finally the amendment to reject the OBU preamble and substitute an objective was put to the vote and carried by 54 votes to 39. Alfred Callanan, who supported the preamble, requested a card vote. This time the verdict was even more strongly in favour of the pro-AWU faction, and the amendment was carried by 177 votes to 92.²⁴ This was an overwhelming victory for the pro-AWU delegates.

Part of the closing business of the Congress was the appointment of an OBU committee to draft a Constitution and perform general propaganda work.²⁵ In September 1919, Andrew Clementson, appointed to be the OBU Committee's Secretary, wrote to the ALF District Councils, "Care has been taken to profit by the stupid mistakes made in the eastern states, and it will be noted that our propaganda and theirs are diametrically opposed." The Circular was accompanied by a leaflet in which Clementson listed "10 reasons for an OBU". He argued that the OBU would be created by a State Industrial Congress and would be "the only Labor Industrial Organisation in this State." All "sections, sub-divisions, divisions, and

departments" of the union would have "specified powers". This point reflects Barker's earlier concern to avoid creating an organisation controlled by a small group of powerful officials. The greatest advantages of the OBU, however, lay in its power to control strikes, prevent "blacklegging" and co-ordinate pay awards. There would no longer be different rates of pay for similar work, nor inter-union jealousy. Clementson concluded that

the democratic control of industry by the workers is impossible under the present antiquated craft union system; the OBU stands for the industrial education of the workers by means of workshop committees, so as to prepare the workers for industrial democracy.²⁵

Clementson's leaflet differed from earlier propaganda,²⁷ in its avoidance of Marxist concepts such as class struggle, seizure by workers of the means of production, and collectivisation. Although he mentioned industrial democracy, he did not advocate the violent overthrow or a radical alteration of the economic system. This marks a considerable change from his unqualified support of the OBU preamble a few months earlier, indicating that the rejection of that document by the 1919 Labor Congress had tempered his views. Clementson's leaflet was a significant factor in gaining the movement acceptance in Western Australia.

By September 1919, eleven OBU organisers were active in sixteen work places in the metropolitan area to spread the propaganda of industrial unionism, and groups had been formed in Bunbury and Albany.²⁸ Above the entrance to the Trades Hall was a verse which ran:

Be workmen still, be workmen true,
Among yourselves united,
For only by the workmen's hands
Shall workmen's wrongs be righted.

Enthusiasm for the OBU ran so high that the Committee considered a suggestion to alter the third line of the verse to read "For only by the OBU..."²⁹ The alteration was not made.

The turning point of industrial unionism in the west was the OBU Congress held in Perth on 25 May 1920,³⁰ for it was here that the militant language invoking revolution was soundly rejected in favour of more moderate objectives. Even attempts to use the name "One Big Union" failed and a resolution was carried, naming the organisation the "Workers Industrial Union of Australia, WA Section". The proposed location of its headquarters in the Perth Trades and Labor Council justified the fear of one delegate at the previous congress that the OBU "would merely mean the establishment of another office in the Trades Hall".³¹ An amendment to include in the Union's objectives, a reference to class struggle being "caused by the capitalist class owning the means of production" and asserting that "there can be no peace as long as want and hunger are found among the millions of working people, and the few who

constitute the employing class have all of the good things of life" was defeated. Instead, the conference opted for a much less polemical constitution. The WIUWA's objects were:

To unite the workers of Western Australia in one organisation, and by the provision and distribution of funds and other means to regulate the conditions of labor, the relations between employers and employees, and workmen and workmen, to replace the present competitive system by one of social ownership of the means of production, distribution, and exchange, and to advocate the formation of one big union of workers for Australia.³²

The Constitution was virtually identical to that of the AWU. Amendments to open the membership to all workers, irrespective of race or gender were defeated and membership excluding "Asiatics or coloured aliens other than Maoris, American Negroes, or the Australian-born issue of mixed parentage" was carried by a small majority of 36 to 27. The Conference also adopted a five-tier management structure starting with the local industrial union and progressing through divisional, provincial and industrial departmental councils to a fifteen-member Grand Council elected by the entire membership of the union. This last body was to be the "supreme authority in the Union" with power to "veto the actions of any [other] governing body or member". The Grand Council's functions included the administration of finances and personnel, and liaison with government bodies. Most significantly, however, it alone could "enter into an agreement, arbitrate, or declare a strike on behalf of all or any of the members of the union."³³ The reservations which Gibson and Barker had expressed at the Melbourne Conference appear to have gone unheeded.

* * * *

The fate of one big unionism was not, however, ultimately decided in conferences and committees in Perth but in one of the AWU's strongholds, the Eastern Goldfields. Among the principle participants were some of the humblest of workers, the largely non-unionised Italian firewood cutters. The Goldfields had been the scene of much industrial unrest during the past year. In November 1919 a group of Nationalist workers attempted to re-register the defunct Coolgardie Branch of the Federated Miners Union (CMU). Justice Rooth, of the State Arbitration Court, refused to register a second union in the industry, and AWU members classed the CMU as "bogus" union and refused to work with its members. In the ensuing strike several violent incidents occurred and a number of AWU leaders were arrested. Considerable bitterness resulted and the incident was still fresh in the memories of Goldfields residents a year later.³⁴

In October 1920, Alfred "Bull" Callanan and a friend named Scott arrived at the main camp on the Kurrawang woodline. They addressed a meeting of the workers, which concluded with the singing of "The Red Flag".³⁵ At Varley's Woodline Camp, the following day, Scott and

Callanan were alleged to have urged the workers to leave the AWU and join the OBU "so that in time the same conditions will prevail here as in Russia and other countries where the OBU is in operation and the worker will get his rights". Speeches of this kind appear to have been well received. At a meeting the following Sunday only two of the 140 workers present declared themselves for the AWU. When AWU officials held a meeting on 24 October only 17 of the 120 workers present were paid up union members entitled to vote. On this occasion Callanan again sought recruits for the OBU.³⁶

One evening, early in November, some 70 to 80 men assembled at the water tank at Lakeside Number Two Camp to hear Callanan speak. Standing on a box, Callanan addressed the men by the light of a hurricane lantern. Constable Richardson, of the Boulder Police, had not come similarly equipped and found it impossible to take notes in the darkness. Nevertheless, he recalled that Callanan

...said that the master class and capitalists had an OBU and they as fellow workers should have an OBU to compete. Workers should control industry, not masters as they were only parasites on workers. [This control was] to be achieved by peaceful revolution. [The workers] did not want bloody revolution. But if they could not get a peaceful revolution, well, they must have it.

Callanan was also reported as saying that in Britain the OBU was bringing "Lloyd George's capitalistic government to its knees". One of the firewood cutters asked him what he thought of the Sinn Fein. He replied that he did not know but he believed they would win with American support. Callanan's speech was reportedly met with hostility from the "Britishers" at the camp. When he announced that an OBU had been established at Kurrawang and showed the men a list purportedly signed by the executive, a interjector called out, "Signed by Bull Callanan". Callanan accused him of lying and proceeded to read out the list of OBU members, all of whom except one were Italians. The "British" cutters told Callanan that they were satisfied with "Mick Costello and the AWU". His class was "not wanted". Only three Italians signed up.³⁷ Even so, by the end of November, Police Inspector Duncan, of Kalgoorlie, informed the Police Commissioner in Perth that 140 OBU workers had gone on strike because the AWU refused to recognise their union.³⁸ The West Australian reported that "80 per cent" of men on the woodlines had joined the new union.³⁹

The brief strike, which resulted from the clash between the AWU and the OBU, lasted for only the first week of December but caused alarm in the goldfields community. The Mayor of Kalgoorlie wired the Premier that the mines were closing down for want of fuel and all work would cease before the end of the week. Harry Axford, the RSL President, sent a peremptory message asking for a reply "by twelve noon" indicating whether the government intended "taking action". Inspector Duncan later commented to the Police Commissioner that "the

Returned Soldiers have been eager to take a hand in this matter and deal with the executive of the OBU but I have, so far, successfully persuaded them not to interfere."⁴⁰

In the meantime, the Labor Opposition Leader, Philip Collier, speaking in the Legislative Assembly, stated that "no such union as the OBU exists in Australia, and these men have simply formed an organisation they call the One Big Union."⁴¹ In this, he was correct, for the title "One Big Union" had not been accepted as the official designation for the union in any state. The organisation which had been formed was entitled the Workers Industrial Union.

Work resumed on Monday 6 December after the intervention of the Italian Consul, Count Gallo, who informed the Premier that the Italian cutters had been "misled [sic] by bad propaganda of criminal Britisher subjects."⁴² The historian Josephine Murray suggested that the strike failed for several reasons. Firstly, the OBU was not recognised by the Labor movement. It, therefore, was regarded as a "bogus" union in the same way as the CMU had been in the 1919 strike. The employers were quick to recognise the AWU as the more moderate union and supported it against the radicals, thus reversing their stance of the previous year, when they supported the CMU. Furthermore, the preponderance of Italians among OBU members stirred up racist sentiments which always ran close to the surface in the goldfields community. It was only 15 months since the race riots in August 1919. Connections were readily made between the "foreign" workers and "Bolshevik" ideology, both of which were "unacceptable" in a "loyal, British" community.⁴³ Murray's assertions are supported by the documentary evidence. Police reports emphasised the revolutionary nature of Callanan's message and his unpopularity among British workers, whilst a section of the press accused him of cowardice.⁴⁴ Earlier estimates of the OBU's popularity appear to have been ignored by the press.

Speaking in the Legislative Assembly, Collier moved that the House adjourn to discuss the closure of the mines. He emphasised the non-British origin of the vast majority of cutters who had joined the OBU. He remarked that it was

...rather an extraordinary thing that a few hundred foreigners, a very small proportion of whom are naturalised Britishers, should thus be able to paralyse one of the principal industries of the State....We ought not to allow a handful of men, and non-Britishers at that, to hold up the whole of the mines in that district.⁴⁵

The Labor Members were at pains to disown Callanan and his associates. The ensuing debate raised a number of important issues. Firstly, the OBU appealed to the wood cutters because they had many grievances. George Lambert, the Labor Member for Coolgardie, in whose electorate the strike occurred, attempted to point out that the whole firewood industry required government intervention. He suggested that the monopoly by the Lakeside and Kurrawang

Companies was largely to blame because, if industrial trouble occurred at one or both, the whole mining industry on the goldfields was held up for want of fuel. He urged the government to support small private contractors by building spur lines into the forests south of Coolgardie. Lambert and Peter O'Loghlen inferred that the appalling conditions and pay at Lakeside and Kurrawang resulted in "Britishers" refusing to work there. Private contractors working along the Norsman line paid for firewood by the load, whereas the big companies paid "by the ton over the weighbridge".⁴⁶

Remarkably, the Speaker regarded the broader issue of the condition of the firewood industry as irrelevant to the debate and tersely informed Lambert that he should confine his comments to the locality of the strike. Clearly exasperated, Lambert raised another issue. He accused the government of allowing the situation at the woodlines to deteriorate in order to "induce the public to believe that the OBU is being supported by the Labour movement". The previous year, in a very similar situation, the government spent a "few thousand pounds"⁴⁷ and equipped "800 or 900 soldiers" to put an end to the industrial strife created by the appearance of the CMU. If the government had wanted to, it could easily have "got rid" of the OBU leaders three months prior to the strike. Lambert did not, however, say how Callanan and Scott might have been prevented from entering the camps and speaking to the cutters. As fellow Labor member, John Willcock, observed, "It is [treading] on dangerous ground to stop a man going anywhere". Earlier in the debate Willcock had vehemently opposed suggestions by Thomas Harrison, the leader of the Country Party; John Scaddan, Minister for Mines, and Frederick Teesdale, the Member for Roebourne, that criminal proceedings be instituted against the "OBU" leaders. Teesdale went so far as to suggest such "solutions" as a firing squad or deportation.⁴⁸

Throughout the debate, it was evident that some of the Opposition members at least were aware that they walked a tight rope between appearing to be in collusion with the "OBU" and the further fragmentation of the Labor movement. The fact that the debate was conducted almost entirely between Labor and ex-Labor members who had left the party in the conscription split in 1917 could not have been lost on conservatives such as James Mitchell. Residual bitterness from the split welled up several times.

Furthermore, there was the matter of differentiating between OBU-ism, the very issue to which the Labor movement had directed so much of its energy over the past two years, and the "bogus" union controlled by Alfred Callanan. As Collier remarked, "I have every sympathy with genuine OBU-ism. I have no sympathy with the bogus organisation."⁴⁹ The difference between the two was spelled out in two editions of the *Westralian Worker*. On 31 December 1921, the *Worker* drew its readers' attention to the "bogus OBU" and stressed that its function was exactly the same as the CMU. "Schismatics - whether Nationalists or Revolutionaries - are enemies of the worker's cause," the paper warned. The "OBU" tickets which were issued

on the woodlines "instead of being certificates of industrial militancy" were "labels of disintegration". Accordingly the paper pledged its support for the AWU.⁵⁰ A month later an "OBU New Year Message" occupied two full length columns of the Worker, clearly laying out the tenets of OBU-ism. A Provisional Committee had been appointed by the Industrial Labor Conference the previous May to work for the amalgamation of all unions, not "a little section of an existing union".⁵¹

Two other important factors influenced the course taken by the ALF: the level of social unrest on the goldfields, and the financial situation of the AWU. The 1919 race riots and strikes have been mentioned previously. Because the industries on the goldfields were so interdependent, firewood cutters' strikes always created unemployment for other workers, especially miners, but also the railway men who operated the woodline trains. During the lengthy strike of firewood cutters in the winter of 1919, over 1,000 miners were unemployed. The government then took some time to respond to the desperate need of the miners and their dependents. Mitchell eventually despatched an official to register the unemployed and their dependents and issue rations. By 30 July, after five days of intense effort, 1,130 miners were registered but an estimated 2,000 remained to be attended to, including the railway men who had also been thrown out of work by the strike. A Charities Department officer arrived to institute a reduced "Charities Scale" of relief, but the men absolutely refused to accept the reduced ration. The Mayors of Kalgoorlie and Boulder and the Police Inspector joined in opposing the new scale, while the Boulder Star denounced "Black Fellows' Rations". Eventually a compromise was reached. These events having taken place less than 18 months previously, Labor MLAs were understandably anxious to have an assurance that the Government would organise the distribution of "relief in necessitous cases, and this without delay and without any too grievous humiliation of the people in the way of charity doles".⁵²

Another factor in the social unrest on the goldfields was the role played by returned soldiers, and especially the RSL. Ex-servicemen had been enrolled as Special Constables during the 1919 strikes. The RSL maintained a high profile as guardian of law and order.⁵³ Thirdly, unrest was fuelled by the deepening economic crisis on the goldfields. Mines were closing, not merely temporarily as a result of strike action, but permanently. At the beginning of 1920, 1,000 men had been thrown out of work by the closure of the Gwalia and Lancefield Mines and the lay offs at Boulder.⁵⁴ More were to follow. In July 1921, for example, Menzies Consolidated at Coolgardie closed.⁵⁵ Apart from these factors, the continuing presence of the CMU on the goldfields presented a threat to the Labor movement. In October 1920 Millington sent a circular to all of the ALF District Councils urging them to appeal against the registration of the "bogus" union in the Arbitration Court on 3 November.⁵⁶ Furthermore, the AWU was deeply in debt, partly as a result of its defence of the miners charged with riot in a dispute at the Fimiston Mine in November 1919.⁵⁷

The social and political situation on the Goldfields at the end of 1920, therefore, was extremely tense. Although many of the more militant members of the Labor movement were attracted to the OBU Scheme, and were disillusioned with the AWU, other equally militant members remained staunch supporters of the latter union. One such was George Callanan, anti-conscriptionist and leader of the "riot" at Fimiston Mine, who served terms as Secretary and President of the AWU's Mining Branch.

* * * *

In May 1922, A.J. Watts, the State AWU Secretary, reported on the OBU movement's "lack of success". The name "Workers Industrial Union" had been abandoned in favour of "Australasian Workers Union" at the 1921 AWU Annual Convention. The six industrial departments were retained. Legal problems arose when the union attempted to issue tickets in the new name rather than that of the AWU.⁵⁸ Perhaps as a final irony the OBU scheme foundered on the very edifice which in its earlier, more militant form, it had attempted to destroy. In May 1924, the Federal Arbitration Court refused to register the Australasian Workers Union. Those who objected to the union's registration included, perhaps predictably, pastoralists' and graziers' associations in New South Wales, South Australia, Queensland and the Southern Riverina (but not the Westralian Pastoralists and Graziers Association); Timber Merchants and Sawmillers, and the Commonwealth Steamship Owners' Association. Twenty four unions also lodged objections to the registration of the Australasian Workers Union. These were mainly craft unions but they included the Timber Workers and the Federated Seamen's Union. Two reasons were given by the Registrar for the Arbitration Court refusing to register the Australasian Workers Union: there was already a union registered by that name, the AWU, and the new union was an organisation of organisations and not an organisation of persons.⁵⁹ The OBU scheme was rapidly sliding into oblivion.

A final factor which probably influenced the demise of the OBU scheme in Western Australia was the loss to the Labor movement of both the Callanans - Alfred and George. In March 1923, Alfred Callanan appeared before the Kalgoorlie Court on a charge of robbery with violence. He admitted holding staff of the Great Boulder Goldmine at gunpoint and stealing £520 but claimed that he had done so as a protest against the persecution of himself and others by the Employers' Federation. This, he informed the Court, was what the Socialists called "propaganda by deed". The Chief Justice, Sir Robert McMillan, who was presiding, said that he had never previously encountered a plea of this nature in all his years at the Bar. The jury retired for two and a half hours but could not agree, so Callanan was remanded in custody and the trial was re-scheduled to be heard at the Supreme Court in April. There, the jury unanimously found Callanan guilty of robbery and sentenced him to seven years hard labour.⁶⁰

George Callanan, who had stood on the opposite side of the dispute from Alfred, died suddenly in December 1923, at the age of 40 while undergoing a relatively minor operation in Kalgoorlie Hospital. His wife had predeceased him by 18 months, probably while giving birth to their youngest child. The five orphaned Callanan children, aged from 18 months to 16 years, were left in the care of George's widowed mother. The Labor movement turned out in force to pay its last respects to a man whom its members mourned as a "stalwart comrade and brother". Despite its crippling financial problems, the Eastern Goldfields District Council donated 20 guineas (\$42) to Callanan's family and obtained free rail passes enabling them to travel to Sydney.⁶¹

In the years between the demise of Alfred Callanan's "OBU" and of George Callanan, however, the attention of the State ALF, the National Party government, and indeed of most Westralians, had turned to other problems. Although the militant wing of the Labor movement remained, its ideology developed in other directions and the issue of the OBU was never again to dominate Westralian Labor politics.

End Notes

1. See, for example, F. Cain, "The Industrial Workers of the World: Aspects of its Suppression in Australia", *Labour History*, No. 42, May 1982, pp. 54-62; P.J. Rushton, "The Trial of the Sydney Twelve: the Original Charge", *Labour History*, No.25, November 1973, pp. 53-57. An account of the Westralian trial occurs in J. Williams, *The First Furrow*, pp. 57-63.
2. See ALF State Executive Correspondence Files (hereafter SE Correspondence Files), Battye Library Accession No. 1688A, Nos. 40, 66, 166, 177.
3. SE Correspondence File No. 166. See also Lenore Layman and Julian Goddard,(eds), *Organise : A Visual Record of the Labour Movement in Western Australia* (Perth, 1988) p. 144 for a copy of the petition signed by the acquitted IWW members and Candish. For details of Alfred Callanan and William Johnston's employment on Fremantle Wharf, see Department of the Army, Intelligence Files, Australian Archives (WA) Accession No. PP14, Series I, No. 1/1/19.
4. Proposed Scheme for Closer Unionism in Victoria (1918), p. 4, in SE Correspondence File No. 189. The Industrial Departments were Building Trades;Mining; Transportation; Printing Trades; Agricultural and Pastoral; Boot, Textileand Clothing; Wood and Metal; Shop, Office and Warehouse; Foodworkers; Public Entertainment; Public Service; Miscellaneous.
5. F. Hyett, "The Advantages of the One Big Union" in Proposed Scheme for Closer Unionism in Victoria, pp. 5, 6.

6. J.S. Garden, The Workers' Industrial Union of Australia. One Big Union Manifesto to Returned Soldiers and Sailors of Australia, in SE Correspondence File No. 189.
7. Minutes of the State Executive of the ALF (hereafter SE Minutes), Battye Library Accession No. 1573A, Vol. 2, 7 January 1918.
8. By the end of World War I the Perth Censor had built up an elaborate network of files which he claimed were related to Don Cameron's activities. These files - entitled "IWWism", "Industrialism", "Socialism", "Rationalism", "Pacifism", "Enemy Nationality and Foreigners", "Revolutionary Ideas", "Anti-Conscription" and "Disloyalists" - were listed in a memo, dated 22 November 1918, from the Perth Censor to the Victorian military authorities, a copy of which is held in Victorian Federal Archives File No. V298. The author checked all the available Perth files with numbers corresponding with those listed in the Memo, but found no reference to Don Cameron.
9. "Extracts from Censor's Intelligence Reports, 5th Military District", 17 August 1918, 7 December 1918, File No. V298.
10. "Extract from Censor's Intelligence Report, 5th Military District", 7 December 1918, File No. V298.
11. "Censor's Intelligence Report, Sub. 3, 21 January 1919: Workers' Industrial Union: One Big Union", p. 5, File No. V282.
12. "Extract from QB 339 - week ended 7 January 1919: One Big Union Propaganda League", File No. V282.
13. R. Evans, The Red Flag Riots : A Study of Intolerance (St. Lucia, 1988), pp. 87, 97-98.
14. Legge/Minister for Defence, 20 January 1919, "Bolshevism -Special Note for the Minister", File No. 479/25/190.
15. Workers' Industrial Union of Australia Preamble, Classification and Rules, adopted at the All-Australia Trades Union Conference, Melbourne, January 1919, copy in SE Correspondence File No. 189.
16. P. Adler (President, TLC Sydney)/McCallum, 14 March 1918, SE Correspondence File No. 189.
17. Barker/McCallum, 21 January 1919, SE Correspondence File No. 189.
18. F.W. Birrell, Force and Intolerance Must Fail - Canada's Experience of One Big Unionism, in SE Correspondence File No. 189; Queensland Central Executive, ALP, Official Manifesto, "Solidarity or Disruption?" Brisbane, Worker Print, 11 March 1919, SE Correspondence File No. 188.
19. ALP (WA Division), Fourth General Council (Tenth Congress) Official Report and Proceedings, (hereafter Fourth General Council Report), pp. 43, 47-50. A copy is held in SE Correspondence File No. 200.
20. Fourth General Council Report, pp. 48, 57.
21. Fourth General Council Report, pp. 48, 49, 52.
22. Fourth General Council Report, p. 56.

23. Fourth General Council Report, pp. 52, 55, 57, 58.
24. Fourth General Council Report, p. 58.
25. Minutes of ALF Special Congresses (hereafter ALF Special Congress Minutes), Battye Library Accession No. 1573A/18, Minutes of the 1919 Labor Congress.
26. A. Clementson, Trade Unionists Unite! A copy is in SE Correspondence File No. 151. See also Circular to District Councils, 29 September 1919, SE Correspondence File No. 188.
27. For example, J.S. Garden, Industrial Unionism. What is it? and OBU - We can and We will Own the Workshops. Copies are held in SE Correspondence File No. 189.
28. "List of OBU Agents" in SE Correspondence File No. 189. These were as follows: "J. Walsh: Railway Men and Carters; ? : Swan Brewery; R. Marshall : Swan Bottling Works, Swan Malt House, Emu Brewery; W. Bourne: Government Printing Office; ? : AWU jobs?; Messrs Cross and Kidd: Car Barn; L. White: Sandover and Co., Perth Tannery; ? Smith: Hoskins Bros.; W. Buck: Povey's; A. Hunt: Barker and Moore; R. Rouse: Bon Marche; L. Stringer: Boans; W. Auld: Sayers and McEvoy."
29. "Suggestions considered by the OBU Committee", dated 11.9.19, SE Correspondence File No. 189. The title of this paper is taken from the OBU version of the verse.
30. ALF Special Congress Minutes, 25 May 1920.
31. Fourth General Council Report, p. 50.
32. ALF Special Congress Minutes, 26 May 1920, and "One Big Union Draft Constitution and Rules", p. 3. A copy of the OBU Constitution is held in SE Correspondence File No. 151.
33. One Big Union: Draft Constitution and Rules, pp. 2, 4, 5.
34. B. Oliver, "Disputes, Diggers and Disillusionment: Social and Industrial Unrest in Perth and Kalgoorlie, 1918 to 1924" in J. Gregory (ed.) Studies in Western Australian History XI: the Interwar Years, forthcoming, May 1990. See also Police Department files No. 3032/1919, 5850/1919 and 579/1920; PDF 203/19 and 398/19, SE Minutes, Vol. 2, 17 November 1919. "Nationalist" unions were created by the Prime Minister, William Morris Hughes, after the Labor Party split in 1917.
35. The singing of this song and the flying of the red flag remained illegal under the unpealed War Precautions Act, until the Act was repealed at the end of 1920. See SE Correspondence File No. 164 re. red flag prohibiton; see also J. Murray, "The Kalgoorlie Woodline Strikes, 1919-1920: A Study of Conflict within the Working Class" in L. Layman (ed.) Studies in Western Australian History, V: Bosses, Workers and Unemployed, December 1982, p. 28.
36. Police Department File No. 8564/1920. The following account is extracted from police reports dated 20 October 1920, 27 October 1920, 6 November 1920.
37. Constable Richardson's Report, 6 November 1920, in Police Department Files, Battye Library Accession No. 439, File No. 8564/20, emphasis is in original.
38. Duncan/Commissioner, 6 December 1920, Police Department File, No. 8564/1920.

39. West Australian, 30 November 1920.
40. Correspondence in Premier's Department File, (hereafter PDF), Battye Library Accession No. 1496, No. 576/20; Police Department File No. 8564/1920.
41. Western Australian Parliamentary Debates, (hereafter WAPD), Vol. 63, 2 December 1920, p. 2086.
42. Gallo/Premier, 4 December 1920, PDF 576/20.
43. Murray, pp. 31-33. The Kalgoorlie race riots occurred in August 1919, after Thomas Northwood, a returned soldier, was fatally stabbed with a kitchen knife. It was claimed that an Italian had been responsible for his death. A mob, including a large number of RSL members, attacked the Italian owned and leased hotels in Kalgoorlie. Details of the riot are in Police Department Files No. 3032/1919 , 3871/1919, and 5850/1919.
44. Sun, 5 December 1920, "Where is 'Bull Callanan?", cited in Murray, p. 34.
45. WAPD, Vol. 63, p. 2086, (emphasis added).
46. WAPD, Vol. 63, pp. 2085-95. The following is based on the account of the debate which took place in the Legislative Assembly on 2 December 1920.
47. The actual cost of hiring approximately 600 special constables at 12/6 per day and feeding them was £4,930/12/6. See Inspector Duncan/Police Commissioner, 13 November 1919, and further correspondence in Police Department File No. 5850/19.
48. WAPD, Vol. 63, p. 2087.
49. WAPD, Vol. 63, p. 2091.
50. Westralian Worker, 31 December 1920.
51. Westralian Worker, 28 January 1921. It is not clear whether the "groups" referred to here are the six "Industrial Departmental Councils" (Transportation and Communi-cation; Building and Construction; Manufacture and General Production; Agriculture, Land and Fisheries; Civil Service and Public Utilities; Mining), incorporated in the structure of the "Workers Union of WA" (See OBU Draft Constitution and Rules, p. 2), or a more cumbersome system of 13 groups proposed by the Metropolitan District Council (See Metropolitan Council Correspondence File, Battye Library Accession No. 1319A, No. 101).
52. See Correspondence and Reports in PDF 224/1919; also clipping from Boulder Star; WAPD, Vol. 63, p. 2090.
53. For an analysis of the activities of the RSL on the Goldfields in 1919, see Oliver, "Disputes, Diggers and Disillusionment".
54. Secretary, AWU Boulder/Premier, 22 January 1920, PDF 29/21.
55. Minutes of the Eastern Goldfields District Council, (hereafter EGDC Minutes), Battye Library Accession No. 1704A, Vol. 4, 18 July 1921.
56. SE Minutes, Vol. 3, 16 November 1921.
57. See letters concerning the AWU's finances in SE Correspondence File No. 36.

58. AWU (WA) Secretary's Annual Report for Year Ending May 31, 1922 , AWU Papers, File No. E154/64/.

59. O.B.U. Why it Failed! (Sydney, 1924), AWU Papers, File No. E15/37/11.

60. Supreme Court Records. Criminal Indictment Register, 1915 to 1936, on Microfilm, Batty Library Accession No. CONS 3422, pp. 183, 197; also West Australian, 18 April 1923.

61. EGDC Minutes, Vol. 4, 17 December 1923, 14 January 1924; Westralian Worker, 21 December 1923, 28 December 1923, 14 January 1924. Also Police Files No.5850/1919 and 579/1920. Murray states (p. 29) that George and Alfred Callanan were brothers; however, Alfred is not mentioned as a surviving relative in the account of George's funeral, which suggests that the Callanans were not, after all, brothers. The silence may otherwise be attributed to the fact that Alfred was serving a prison sentence at the time of the funeral.

Gil Barr's Story

Part 2*

In 1968 when Cec Reen, the A.W.U. North West organiser decided he'd had enough, the Branch Executive rang and asked if I wanted to take his job, till the election, so I decided I'd take the plunge and do it. It was the 12th August, 1968, when I started. I worked down in the Perth office for about two weeks. I got sick of that. I wanted to go to the Pilbara. They wanted to go and live in Wittenoom in the first place as it was pretty central. Mt. Tom Price and Newman were near. A little bit of work in Wittenoom at that time. I'd been through Wittenoom a number of times, always see all the dust. I wasn't taking my family there. If I'm to live up north, I'd want to live on the coast. So, we got a State house in Port Hedland. Arthur Bickerton was the Minister for Housing at that time, he helped us get one. I went up there for a few weeks first, did a run around the place and so on. Joy, my wife, and the children came up in October, 1968.

Reid: What was the membership of the A.W.U. there at that time? Was it a mining area or still shearing?

Barr: There were a few shearers, sheep were going out by then in that area. Something concerned me greatly when I got back to Port Hedland in 1968. That De Grey Station I mention earlier. When I was there in 1956 we never had a proper award for the aboriginal people at that time. At De Grey there would have been between 120 and 130 aboriginals living on the station, the workers, the old people, wives and kids. They had camps, they'd get their tucker and their clothing. They weren't looked after, they were merely existing there. I went back up in 1968, they were shearing out at De Grey, that was one of the first places I went to. I was amazed when I got there, all those people had moved off the place. There were only eight left, still employed on the station. I said to the squatter, "Gee, I was here in 1956 twelve years ago, there were 130 aboriginals on the station, now you've only got eight." What happened in 1966 we had aboriginals included in the Pastoral Industry Award and the squatters found out that they had to pay them all the correct wages, proper conditions and so on. Sheep were going out at that time, the numbers had been reduced because of the cost, they went more for cattle. A lot of stations wouldn't pay the aboriginals the wages. They simply moved these people off the stations and put them in reserves. Something I've always wondered since, give them their proper wages and conditions, certainly a principle we always stood up for, those who were entitled to it should have it. Whether we did them a justice or an injustice is another thing, especially as far as their social life was concerned. I remember them out on the stations,

*Gil Barr was for many years an official of the Australian Workers' Union, being both WA State and Federal President before his retirement in 1988.

This is part two of the transcript of an interview with Gil Barr conducted by Stuart Reid as part of the TLC Oral History Project, 14 December 1988. The last part of this interview will be carried in the next number of Papers in Labour History.

they never used to get boozed - they were nice people - always pretty well behaved. When you saw them on the reserves in town they were full of plonk and booze, fighting, acting really disgraceful. I often wonder if we did it right or did we do it wrong. It really was the right thing to do, pay them the proper wages and condition, but when you saw the degradation of these people when they were shifted off these stations on to reserves, it used to make me feel awful at times.

That was one of the first places I went out organising, in October. The wages, working for the union in those days weren't too good. We were in this State house, it gets pretty hot up in the Pilbara. We used to have a seven month summer. You'd get your first century before the end of September, the last one about the end of April. Pretty hot and humid. Joy and the four children in that house, one fan, which was in the lounge room. I contacted Frank Mitchell, the Union Secretary, told him something had to be done about the house, it was just too hot. He said it was my problem, so I went to the State Housing, and had to pay additional rent to get a fan put in each of the rooms. When I was first up there, I found the cost of living so high. I was drawing money out of the bank as well as the wages the union was paying me, just to live. I finally jacked up on them. At the January Branch Executive meeting, I told them I needed a housing subsidy. I was in the same position as other workers in the area. The high cost of living up there, we just couldn't afford it. They gave me \$12 a week housing subsidy which helped a bit. Made things a little better.

I was organiser in the Pilbara till October, 1972, when I came down to Perth as Branch Secretary. That was the best four years of my union life. When I went there, there were only 700 members, in the A.W.U. up there. That was the two Goldsworthy sites, Hammersley iron was operating at the time, a lot of construction work, P.W.D., pastoral workers and so so. There had been a fellow there before me, but he couldn't stand the pace, he didn't have the attitude to get in amongst the guys. When I started in September 1968, there were 700 members, by July 1971 I had 4,600 members in the union up there. That was in a little less than three years. It was hard work. I used to do a thousand miles a week in the car. There'd be a blue at Tom Price. I'd get up at 3.00 am, be up there around 7.30 - 8.00 am, work there all day, come home around 11.00 pm. Then they'd ring me up, tell you that there was a barney on at Goldsworthy or somewhere like that. Poor old Joy and the family. Sometimes I'd say, "Look, I'm going this week down the railway line from here to Newman. I'll come back through Wittenoom and Tom Price and be home by Thursday." I'd leave on Monday morning, and they'd see me about two and a half weeks later. There'd be barneys on here and there. They'd always track you down wherever you were. They just never knew when I was going to be home. They were very good. Throughout our married life, Joy has always been a real backbone. Never grizzled or complained. The only time she did go crook about the union really was at Christmas, 1969, I think it was. I was going to take a months leave and bring them all down to Perth. Three days before Christmas, due to leave, all the cases packed, I had

the station wagon just about backed up to the back verandah, to put the cases, Joy and the family in, the phone rings. It was Frank Mitchell, secretary, strike at Tom Price. There was to be a compulsory conference. I was ordered to be there that night. I had to jump in the car, two days later we arrived in Perth - Christmas Eve.

The conditions at Tom Price were that bad, especially the working hours. The workers on the Rail construction and in the mining companies, they went up there on a 60 hour week. A lot of them, even though the 40 hour week was well and truly in, in fact some places were down to 35 or 38 hours a week, though 60 hours was the norm, overtime was only given after they had worked the 60 hours. It was shocking. Especially the conditions out on these construction jobs, and the maintenance gangs between Hedland, Goldsworthy, Dampier and Mt. Tom Price. It was C.M.M. You'd drive up there and see a gang of blokes, stop and talk to them. They'd stop for lunch. All they'd have was a demijohn of water, and Poon's power packs. A plastic bag with a little bit of salami or polony, a bit of tomato, onion, and lettuce, all wilted and hot. These poor workers would be sitting outside on the side of the railway line, or under a bush, flies everywhere, it was disgusting. You'd see them riding on the backs of trucks, sometimes they'd have one or two seats on them, no water on the back for them. They'd have all their gear, just laying on the floor, no box to put them in for safety or anything like that. It took me about 15 months to really keep hammering these companies to provide safety, and a little caravan for the blokes to eat their lunch in, iced water and all that sort of jazz. The blokes working for C.M.M. really appreciated that. A lot of them were Slavs, Greeks and Spaniards. I became very friendly with this one particular Slav. I was driving along the railway line this day, I saw a gang and I stopped. I'd never drive passed them without stopping and talking to them. They'd call me "Union Man". I pulled up this day, this blue truck was up beside the railway line, they were having smoko. As soon as I got out of the car, this Slav, Nick, calls, "Oh, Union Man." They gave me a mug of coffee and I talked to them. As I went to leave Nick said, "Hang on a minute. Don't leave. I want to show you something." So I'm standing there looking at this bloke, he goes and gets this long stick, about eight foot long. He went to the back of the truck, pokes the stick into the back of the seat and yells, "Hey, you bastard, you come down here and you pay your union dues like the rest of us." Quite humorous really.

I had some hassles up there at the start. In fact, when I first started the job, there hadn't been anybody up there for about four or five months. the bloke there before me just wasn't strong enough to do the job. When we got to Hedland, they were just building the railway line from Port Hedland down to Newman. M.K.M.O. were doing it. They had an office in Port Hedland. I went in and found out where all the camps were. I was only there for about three days, so I thought, I must go and front up at my first job. I didn't know all that much about construction in those days. I'd worked on a maintenance gang, done some truck driving and so on, but not big construction. I knew very little about that. I thought I'd go and front up to

these blokes and see what was going on. There's a quarry, 40 miles out of Port Hedland. I went out there first. I go and pull up at this quarry, they were working two ten-hour shifts. This guy was operating the dozer there. I had a talk to him, introduced myself. Didn't he blow his stack. "The A.W.U., we don't want to see you guys any more. We had all the trouble in the world, but couldn't get anybody up here." He really went off his rocker. I told him I was stationed up there now, and hoped I could get things going a lot better. I went over to the mess, put up a notice, UNION MEETING. When I fronted at the meeting, in trooped 30 or 40 of the blokes. While I'm talking to them, 29 signed a petition that they'd never take another ticket in the A.W.U. They walked up to the table and handed it to me. That was a pretty rough sort of start. I said to them, "Fair enough, there's been some neglect. You couldn't get people up here, but I'm here now. I'll try to get the job done and straighten things out for you." They asked where I was going next. I told them I was going to do the next camp. They said: "Don't go up to the main camp, they'll bury you up there." Nevertheless, I told them I was going. It was about 130 miles out of Hedland, nearly 6000 blokes there, a big place. I got there eventually, about 6.00 pm. Luckily, the canteen was open, so I walked into the canteen, the first bloke I nearly fell over as I went in was a fitter. I knew him in Carnarvon. "What are you doing here, Gil?" he asked. I told him. He replied, "Gee, I don't like your chances, but I'll give you a hand as much as I can." I talked to him and a few other guys for a while. They were all discontented and quite rightly so. The safety on the job was non-existent, the tucker wasn't too bad, some of them weren't being paid correctly. They really bore into me. There was a tank stand just near the quarters, I went and put up a notice saying there'd be a union meeting that night. Just three blokes turned up. Lovely kettle of fish. I couldn't get a bed. I'd taken by swag, I camped in my car out in the bush. Next morning, I came in and saw the bloke in charge of the construction. I said to him, "Look, we've got problems here, half the blokes are crooked on the union, crooked on the company, crooked on everything. Things aren't being done right. I'm going to stop here for a while, and just see if we can't sort things out a bit." He couldn't object because he couldn't keep me off the job. He wouldn't give me a bed or hut, I had my own tucker with me so I used to sleep out in the bush. Every morning for two weeks I'd come and jump on one of these trucks, go out on the job with the blokes, had a look at their job classifications. If they should have been paid at a higher rate of pay, I'd get them reclassified. Had a look at the safety issues and so on. After about a week I had become friendly with a lot of the guys, and a few of them started to join the Union. It took me six weeks at that camp. I was determined I was not going to fail. I got everything sorted out and every one of them joined the Union. It was hard work. I only went home twice. I stayed there, the blokes saw we were doing something. I had to go and leave them, there were blues at Tom Price, but at least I had got them set up.

It was the same at the mining towns. There were only a few of the blokes in the union. They always used to stick together but weren't in the unions. It took me 18 months to get it all established and reps. elected on all the jobs. It was funny, our union ticket in those days,

before I became Branch Secretary, they were reluctant to join up with the other unions and participate in all the affairs, have joint committees and so on. I said the only way the blokes will get a go in the Pilbara was to form a combined union meeting.

Reid: Why did the A.W.U. do it that way?

Barr: It was just the A.W.U. attitude. They were the biggest union in those days, in Western Australia. Could stand on it's own two feet, and do it's own thing. If you were a bit of a militant, didn't see eye to eye, the A.W.U. has always been very conservative politically, didn't see eye to eye with the left wing unions and the A.L.P. Very suspicious. Even if you were a bit too militant, they reckoned you were a communist, and didn't want to be associated with you. Did everything they could to put a spoke in your wheel. I nearly got sacked two or three times by the Branch Secretary when I was in the Pilbara. I was always a bit of a militant when I was young. Everyone was. I just went along with them.

Reid: They knew you were militant when they put you on?

Barr: Yes. They realized that they would never succeed in the Pilbara unless they had a person who was willing to work hard and was very active, and had enough guts to front up and do the job. They picked me as the person who had all those qualifications. It worked. The other reason too, was the shearing contract I was on for the last three years. Rob Mitchell who was Frank's brother. I had quietened down the last two years I was shearing, simply because he had a good run. All good conditions and everything was going right. There was no need to be striking and all the things I had done in the early years. I think they sort of looked at that, and Rob Mitchell had been reporting to his brother, telling him that Gil Barr would make a good organiser. I had the spirit and the strength to go and attack the job, that's why they gave it to me.

After a while I got in contact with Jim Coleman and Paddy Troy. I'd only been up there four or five months and Paddy Troy came up there with the Seamen's Union. He was one of the best educators I ever had. I told him all the problems I had in the Pilbara, and he advised me of the likely solutions - combined union committees and so on. He was a great bloke. I told him that when he got back to Perth - I wouldn't get much co-operation out of my own people - asked him would he talk to Coleman and make up a charter for combined union committees. He did that, we formed combined union committees on all the mining sites. There were demarcation issues and so so, but that really started the thing rolling up there.

We used to have a lot of demarcation issues with the Transport Workers Union and sometimes with the Amalgamated Metalworkers and Shipwrights Union, not so much with them though, also the Electrical Trades Union. They found that once you got the combined union

committees pretty active, they'd be some reps. poaching A.W.U. members. That didn't suit our Branch Executive, the Branch Secretary, or me for that matter. I used to get real crooked on them. Down at Dampier, they started a council there, heading to form a barrier council, same as in Broken Hill. Some of the other Union Secretaries were involved in it too, decided that the only way for each union to maintain its own rights and so on was for the A.W.U. to pull out. So, where I had been encouraging it before, I pulled our blokes out. I told them the reasons for doing so, they agreed. They could see what was going on too, that sort of busted

that up for a while. Didn't make me very popular with a lot of people around the Dampier area, but it had to be done. That was 1971.

Reid: What were the specifics of what was going wrong in Dampier?

Barr: They had a fellow by the name of Frank Wagner there. He was the Secretary of the Combined Union Committee. They weren't restricting their operations just to Hammersely Iron in Dampier and surrounding areas. They were going out to the salt places, construction and so on. I couldn't be every where at once. Something happened, they went out to Dampier Salt, and signed a lot of on-site drivers, who rightfully belonged to the A.W.U. into the Transport Workers Union. They signed some of the dozer and front end loader operators into the Federated Engine Drivers. They did the same with some of the C.M.M. blokes who were close by, there was another mob that used to do the maintenance around the town. I said, "This is not on. I've helped some of you blokes for 15 - 18 months, now you're ratting on us and joining other unions." Frank Mitchell, quite rightly, marched round to the T.L.C. and jacked up on the other unions. That's when he said, "No more A.W.U. in combined union committees." Anyway, we straightened all that out. Pulled them all out of the committees for a while. Got all the members that were thieved off us back into the A.W.U. again. Then we'd start fighting again.

Reid: Was there a lot of competition for members?

Barr: In the early days up there, you'd only have union officials come up there when there were disputes on. Now and then they'd do a run through the place. They couldn't pay attention to it, that's why we needed the combined union committies. The thing was this, that once you got the combined union committees under a charter, they were so enthusiastic that they'd sign up every man and his dog on the site into whatever union they thought they ought to be in. You'd find then some were in the wrong union and there would be a row about that.

It was great to see, the blokes had never ever succeeded in getting on top of the companies until we set up those committies. When you saw some of the awful conditions under which they were working. That's where I first met Harry Peden, at the Utah Jild Dredging. I went up

there just after they got rid of the Japanese. You might recall there was a big row early 1968 when they brought the Japanese dredge in, and a Japanese crew with them. There was a hell of a row until they got rid of them. I arrived just as they were going, they then employed Australians as crew.

Reid: What was the union involved in that?

Barr: The A.W.U. We had all the dredge hands, all the shore hands, the pipeline hands and so on. The Boilermakers had a lot of people on Finucane Island repairing all the pipes. The Merchant Service Guild and the E.T.U. had a few people there, the F.E.D. had the odd one too, mainly our blokes, of course, once we got rid of the Japanese things settled down. Then there was an American dredge. Things were on fairly smoothly, we had a good camp, Poon brothers were running it. The dredge was such a good job, one where they couldn't afford any stoppages, that they just put on first class tucker, everything was pretty good.

One dispute arose, when I first met old Harry. They used to have a work barge on which they did a lot of repairs to the pipe. The pipes were real worn, they'd take it and reweld it and so on. They'd do some maintenance on this work barge, just near the dredge. They had an electric welder on it. What happened, the wires were a bit faulty, and they set fire to the fuel, bits of rag on the barge, and set fire to the barge. So they sacked two guys, reckoned it was their fault. One was a boilermaker. As soon as they sacked them, I held a meeting with our guys. Went to the company, told them they couldn't sack them. They just said, "Oh no. They've been careless, they set fire to the barge, that's why they are sacked." I said, "It's not on. I've talked to the blokes. They've told me they have been telling you guys about the faulty wires. There's junk lying all over the place on that barge. A bit of housekeeping is in order. You wouldn't give them time to do it. Now you have sacked them, and it's your fault in the first place. Not the workers." They wouldn't give in. I had a meeting with all the blokes, pulled the pin. With the dredging the ones they had in those days, they used to pump all the slush in on to the shore. The Port Hedland Harbour were deepening the harbour to take the bigger iron ore ships. They'd be working one side of the harbour with the sludge pump on the other. They'd have to break the line sometimes to let the ship through. When the blokes were on strike, they had to leave a gap in the pipeline for the ships to get back and forth. A big wind sprung up, the blokes had been out two or three days. No way was the company going to put the guys back. I said to the blokes "A nice wind coming up today, let's see what happens to the pipeline." The pipeline busted, started floating up the coast. I had another meeting with the guys. The company had become real upset, the cost was a couple of hundred thousand dollars each day the strike was on. I told the blokes I thought the company was about to give in. The rep. and I went down to the company's office. I see this guy sitting across the room. I used to always wear brown shirt, brown shorts, long socks and boots. He's looking at me and I'm looking at him. Joe Baldetter was running the company, he came out the door and said, "All

right, Mr. Barr, I'll see you now." This guy sitting across the room said to me, "What are you seeing him about?" I answered, "Seeing him about these two blokes that have been sacked, want to get them reinstated." "Oh," he said, "I'm Harry Peden from the Boilermakers Union. I had a good yarn to Harry, told him what the score was. He had thought I was the boss. We often talked about that. "Gee, Gil," he'd say, "The first time I ever saw you in that room, dressed like that, I thought you were a boss, thought I was waiting my turn to see you."

To get back to the strike, I went into Baldetter, him sitting behind his desk. We just laid it straight on the line to him. "Reinstate those two blokes, pay the blokes for the time they were off, once you agreed to that, we'll put them back to work."

This was the first time I had met Harry. I really got to like him after that. He was a communist, president of that party at that time. I never heard Harry try and shove his communist thoughts or beliefs on to any one. He never encouraged any worked that way at all. Harry was a good hard-nosed old unionist. If he had a dispute he just looked for ways of ending it. A lot of people would say, "Oh, that Com." That was his business as far as I was concerned. He never lectured anyone. He would just take a good hard line attitude and that was it. He was a great guy. Same with Paddy Troy. A bit of a problem that our union wouldn't accept that you could work with people like that. I did. Those sorts of union guys are sadly missed today, there's not enough of them left around.

It was funny how we came to form the first provincial council of the T.L.C. up there. I had a lot of trouble with the Mt. Newman Mining Company, couldn't get the guys in the union. They were tough. There were some construction blokes in the union. I went down there, they had an ex-Queensland cop, he had been president of the Liberal Party in Cairns, North Queensland. He was their industrial officer, knew the award inside out, and my rights as far as union organiser were concerned. The only time I'd get on a job was to drive in on the ute with him. He'd jump around and went with me to the mine. They wouldn't give me any accommodation, no way. I'd have to sleep out with my swag. There was an Irish bloke there, Walsh, and another young fellow, good blokes.

We used to call meetings, only get 10 - 15 blokes attending out of 400 I said we'd keep at it. I was in Hedland one night, the telephone rang. It was Walsh. "Look Gil, these three blokes got sacked, all the guys want to jack up about it, but we don't know what to do." It was a golden opportunity. I left there and then. Arrived by 6.00 am, got all the blokes together in a mass meeting. We got them to really support these three blokes. I told them the advantages of being in the union. I got them all behind it. Went and fronted the company and finally got the three guys reinstated. It was only a matter of a day or so. From then on, we started to get membership as the guys could see the benefit of it. As soon as they started to join, we started

to look at the dust situation. As I had pointed out to the blokes, I couldn't do anything until they joined the union, then I could make the company do something. This ex-Queensland cop, Kevin Mahoney, used to hate unions, he hated me, he hated anybody who even talked about them. The blokes would only get five cents an hour dust money. This was shocking, the way it was up there. Never enough water trucks. The blokes decided that they wanted some more. I got them to jack up, had an inspection, tried to get all the records of dust money they had been paid over a period of time. This Mahoney always played golf on a Thursday so I got out to the mine early Thursday morning and said, "Kevin, later on I want to get up to the office and inspect the pay sheets, to find out the amount of dust money the workers have received." He got the whole records out and said, "I'm off to play golf, I'll leave them all in my office. You can go through them." What a laborious job, you had to go through them and check each one to see what the payments were. The paymaster was there and asked what I was trying to do, I told him. He told me he could fix that, he had all the payments collated. Beauty. I was sitting there writing down all the figures as fast as I could. One of the mine engineers came in, worked out straight away what was going on. Mahoney had finished his game of golf, the mine engineer rushed out to get him. By this time it was too late. I had all the evidence I needed. We got the guys an increase in the dust money. We did a lot of things around the place, the food was awful. The shift workers, there was no mess on the Hill, nothing, they used to take these Poon's Power packs up, knock off, have a bit of a wash sit down on the ground, or anywhere, and eat these packs. They had a bit of a mess there, but it wouldn't even accommodate half of them. I got into them about that. I told the blokes that they'd have to get organised, make up a plan and do it themselves.

We made up a plan, they used to work two ten-hour shifts. The afternoon shift guys would go to work in buses, have these Poon's power packs. They'd work till crib time, then they'd refuse to eat the tucker, and refused to work any more. The company used to take the buses away. They used to walk home, about four miles or so, in the middle of the night by the time they had walked down the hill and all the way into town. We had another compulsory conference about that. Bernie O'Sullivan came up for an inspection. We put up a pretty good case, and got a proper mess put on the Hill, hot tucker and so on. That really sort of kicked it off, really got the place going. It was good.

Reid: Were the conditions for the mining company workers different from the contractors, were you doing them both?

Barr: Yes. The construction contractors always had good food in the mess. Out on the job was always pretty rough till we got a proper truck with proper eskies and so on.

One thing we did get for the Main Road Workers - talking about the conditions for different people. They used to live in tents, as well as the P.W.D. guys. Awful. The construction

contractors like M.K.M.O. had air conditioned huts. What was happening, all the good operators would leave the Main Roads, and would go to the construction people. The wages and conditions were better. Except for the few who had been working for the Main Roads for years, married blokes, living permanently in Port Hedland. I had a meeting with the blokes, I said, "Look, we've got the Government over a barrel." The turnover was so big. Some of the operators would come and only stay two weeks and go. I told the blokes I'd fight to get them some decent conditions. Charlie Court was the Premier at the time. I got hold of the Industrial Officer we had in Perth, Horrie Barry. I came down to Perth. I'd arranged a meeting with the Main Roads, they were all right they wanted to put in decent conditions but weren't being allocated the funds to do it. We had this great conference with two or three of the top Main Roads engineers, the Government and old Charlie. I said to him, "Well, look, the position is this, the turnover in labour is something horrific, you're not getting any work done, not getting any value for money. There are just not the experienced people there to do it. It's costing you three or four times the amount of money it should, just to get the roads done." That's when we first started to get the air conditioned quarters and so on for the Main Roads blokes and the P.W.D. Simply by pointing out the fact that they weren't staying, they'd go and work for other construction companies. The blokes themselves did a bit of jacking up too. At least once a fortnight, they'd jack up. They they gradually started putting in air conditioned quarters. Some of the real old guys, who had worked in the north all their life, worked in the Main Roads Department they used to like the tents, liked getting into a camp, putting their pad down and hammock. In fact, some were quite crooked on me. They didn't want to live in the air conditioning quarters. They'd sooner stay in their tents these blokes in their 60's just would not move into the new quarters. Some of them had worked there twenty or thirty years. That was their attitude, sooner live like that, than move into modern stuff, as they used to call it.

Reid: What about the work establishing awards for the mining industry?

Barr: When I first got up there, labourers were on 93 cents an hour. Even the fitters and electricians were on \$1.15 - \$1.18 an hour. It was the hours that used to get them. They were working that many hours it wasn't funny. They used to sign a contract, and arrangement with the company, that they'd work a 60 hour week. Six ten-hour days. You have to remember that a lot of them were of different nationalities, they came from all over the world. Down at Newman mine, for instance, they had 73 different nationalities in the union. Hard to believe but it's a fact. People would come there for six months or a year, get a quid and get out. Took a lot of convincing that it was a 40 hour week, not a 60 hour week. They were getting paid overtime for the 20 hours. Kelly made an award in 1969. We had inspections, trekked all over the place, he gave them very little. A slight increase here and there. That's when he put in the much hated suspension clause.

Reid: What was that?

Barr: Because of the isolation of the place, the long distance away, if a bloke created a misdemeanour on the job, rather than being sacked, he could be suspended off the job for a period of time, as a penalty. We found that a bloke could have a row with a foreman, abuse him, and he'd get suspended for a week. Another one is if a bloke had an accident on a bit of machinery, through carelessness, they'd suspend him for two or three weeks.

This suspension clause came in. I'd go out on the job, get the suspension period reduced from a week to three days, a fortnight to a week and so on. We'd reckon we'd done a good job. Shouldn't be on at all. We approached the companies, they reckoned it was a good whip hand for them, they used to love it, little Hitlers, some of the middle management were. If they could dish out a week's suspension without pay, they'd be in their glory. We couldn't get them to cut it out. What we did, started at Tom Price, we got the blokes to suspend themselves each day a fellow worker was on suspension. It went on for a couple of years after, but not with such severity.

That award Kelly brought down was awful. They went on strike all over the Pilbara over it. Would not accept it. That was when the Union Secretary at the time, made things a bit hard for me. He believed in arbitration. You went to arbitration and accepted the umpire's decision. When Kelly's award came down, the blokes said they wouldn't accept it under any circumstance. It was the first real big strike throughout the whole area. The newspapers contacted the Union Secretary, made the statement that they had all gone off half cocked. They should accept arbitration and all that. I went to Tom Price, the blokes were real crooked. I copped all the backwash. I said to them, "Hang on a minute, you don't see in the papers any statement that I have made, I went through this with you guys, doing inspections, trying to get you better conditions, and the rates of pay lifted. I didn't say the things you have read in the papers." That sort of calmed things down a bit. They were out for about three weeks. That's when we entered the first over award payment. What they used to have was a bonus system on all the sites, where you'd work so many hours or so many weeks and over a period of time you'd get X amount of dollars. That was no good. That's when we hit the companies for a straight over award payment. We got our blokes \$7.50 and the tradesmen \$12.00 that made it fairly reasonable then. It took us three weeks of strike, all the hassles in the world. Goldsworthy, Finucane Island, Dampier, Tom Price, the whole lot stopped, the four sites stopped as well - Dampier, Tom Price, Finucane Island and Goldsworthy. Cliffs hadn't started then.

I was talking a while ago, about the time we got the first provincial T.L.C. started. The difficulties in Mt. Newman, we had talks and finally got it organised there. In the port the

guys were a little better organised but every time they stopped when a ship was in, the staff would load the thing, and away it would go. The company didn't care a hell of a lot. I said to the blokes, "Look, we can't cop this. That's our major weapon, we've got to tie the ships up." I had talks with the Merchant Service Guild and the Seamen's Union, and as soon as I had explained the whole situation to them, they were good fellows, they said, "Look Gil, if you get another dispute with Mt. Newman Mining Company, let us know, and we just won't move the ship. Full stop." I've always remembered the time it did happen. It was a Japanese ship, the blokes on the ship's loader and crusher had a barney, they jacked up and stopped work. The staff would then load the ship. I said to the company's Industrial Officer and the manager, "Look, don't load that ship, otherwise you're in trouble. I've been to see the other unions, we're going to have a combined effort to stop you." They said, "We're going to load." The staff then proceeded to load the ship. I waited till they got on with it, then went to see the Seamen's Union. They rang the company and told them that the ship was blackbanned. The company, B.H.P. of course, decided that that would not happen, they continued fully loading the ship. Then the Seamen's Union just let it sit there.

There was a good bloke named Weston, with the Seamen's Union. Paddy Troy had just been up there a little while before. This Weston called a mass meeting of all the combined union workers, the wharfies, Seamen's Union, Merchant Service Guild, the whole lot. That's when we formed the TLC up there - provincial council that is, it was 1970. I was Secretary for 1970 and 1971, then president in 1972, when I came down to Perth as Branch Secretary. That was one of the best things we've ever done. Once we got that formed, the companies could see the writing on the wall. We really worked well together, well and truly had these companies over a barrel. We did a lot of good things, as far as conditions were concerned. We didn't only deal with iron ore companies. The local Shire Councils, they weren't organised, we got some of the blokes there in the union, got better conditions for them. Got a bit of Aboriginal employment going, none of them would employ Aboriginals at all. The Main Roads, PWD and the Shire Councils would, but not the mining companies. We got that started. That was a bit difficult, some of them were pretty hard to keep at work. We put a burden on our own back forcing the companies to employ them, because we'd spend more time getting them to work and keeping them there. You can't blame them too much, it was shift work, just not part of their life. They were fairly good in attending work on just the day labour gangs but we insisted they were given every opportunity to do all sorts of things that could be done.

We got a good organization going in the consumer action movement, through the provincial TLC, and through Ruth Coleman. She used to be the consumer action movement person in Perth, before she entered Parliament. We had a big barney on in Mt Newman over wages and conditions, wages in particular. We got the guys \$14.00 a week increase, a pretty big increase at that time. We got the over award system in, got rid of the bonus system. This electrician had been down to this MacDonaldis store, the week before we got the increase, with a shopping

list. Luckily he kept it along with the prices. After we settled the dispute, he reckoned the prices had risen since the week before he went back with the exact same shopping list, even though no costs of goods had gone up, it cost him \$16.00 more. We got the Provincial TLC and the ALP. I had also started an ALP Branch in Port Hedland. Anyway, we started doing this surveillance of prices and goods, built up this case on how we were being ripped off. We found out that they were getting their freight costs on top of the cost of the goods, then they had to pay a certain amount of tax. They were putting their freight charges to the price of the article as well as their profit margin. It was shocking. This girl, Carol Fagan, I had her as secretary at the ALP there, she was a local girl, had been there a long time, she was a school teacher. She got a lot of the towns people worked up. I had all the union guys. We pamphleted the whole town. South Hedland had just started then, so it was mainly Port Hedland and Cooke Point. We had this mass meeting in the Civic Centre. A lot of the towns people attended, the biggest meeting that had ever been held in Port Hedland. We had Bickerton up there. Ruth Coleman, and the Liberal member for the North Province. He came from Kununurra, held the seat before Peter Dowding was elected there. We had the Shire Council people, all sorts - over 700 people came. We got this Consumer Action Group moving it really got revved up. John Tozer was the Liberal member, Charlie Court's administrator of the north-west. There was a hell of a row, every time they put in an excuse to raise their prices we'd hop up and down. After this big meeting, Joy, my wife, was made one of the convenors. We used to have this Price Watch scheme. Had their little badges on, every time they'd walk into a shop, the shopkeepers would shudder. You'd go into some of the shops, some of the items would have five different prices on them.

Another confrontation I had up there in my early days, the Parents and Citizens Association. Things weren't going that good at the school. Joy was on the canteen with the kids at Port Hedland State School. The school had no library, no canteen or anything else. We helped get all that sorted out. There was talk of putting in a Senior High School and a Hostel up there. As far as Charlie Court was concerned, Karratha was his baby - any development would be there in preference to any other place. We got all our heads together in Port Hedland, we all thought it should be built in South Hedland. As well as being the union organiser, the Labour Council secretary, I was also the president of the P & C for twelve months. We got the Lions, Jaycees, two or three of the church groups, and all the local community groups, all got together and said, "We'll all do our homework, have a confrontation with the Government, and demand that the hostel and high school be built in South Hedland." I did all the work around the country areas. I was going around organising Goldsworthy, Wittenoom and Tom Price. There were a number of people who had children going away to school in Perth, who could all use a hostel and a high school in Hedland, particularly in Hedland as compared to Karratha. With all these civic people and myself, we decided to meet Charlie Court about it when he was coming up there for a meeting with the shire council. He used to have a meeting with all the shire councils once a year. He made us wait till about ten o'clock at night to see him. He was trying

to get it over and done with in a hurry. I was spokesman for the group, we had all these facts and figures ready to show him. The then administrator of the North-West, John Tozer, was trying to assist Charlie. Charlie was arguing against us to where it ought to be built. He had his figures, they were all six to eight months old. I had ours which were all up to date. Every time Tozer would bring up a figure, Charlie would start arguing for him. I'd just roll and knock them over. I'd never seen Charlie so angry and frustrated in all my life, he went white in the face. He just could not beat us, we had done our homework properly. We got the hostel and high school built in South Hedland before it went to Karratha. That was some of the community work we used to do through the provincial council up there. This was quite good for the whole show.

Until mid 1971, they had a bonus system going that was split into five parts. One was for the Hill area at the mine, another was for the train and ship loader, maintenance area, another section of the bonus was the FED carting the ore from the mine to the port side, the fourth section for all the maintenance workers in the port side, and the fifth was for all the operators and ship loaders and so on. The company had it so there was X amount of dollars for turning up to work regularly, so many dollars for safety, and so many for production. They had it all their way, that if there was a stoppage on the Hill, and, for instance, the ore couldn't be loaded on the train, not only did the blokes on the Hill lose their bonus, so did the others. The blokes got jack of this. If it operated smoothly, as the company demanded, there'd be no stoppages, nothing, the blokes were given a few dollars out of it, wasn't much. The guys thought that that was no good. We already had the straight over award payment at Goldsworthy and Hammersley Iron. Something like \$26:00 a week. We had a mass meeting in Hedland and at the mine. We approached the company, asked them to change the bonus system to a straight over award payment. Of course, they rejected that immediately. We started putting a few bans on. Firstly by putting bans on overtime, but it didn't have any effect on the company. Then we'd have a one-day stoppage, then a two-day stoppage, the company just laughed. We had another mass meeting with the guys, and they all went on the grass. In Hedland and out at the mine as well. They were out for about a week. We had a conference before Commissioner Kelly, he just couldn't do anything about it, and the company would not budge. We had another meeting with the blokes, they refused to go back to work till the company decided to change. That was a four week stoppage. We were having mass meetings about every three days. In the finish, we used to get on the back of a ute, had a meeting at the single men's quarters in Hedland and down at the mine. I went out to the basketball court, I was reporting back to the blokes, they'd say, "Well Gil, what's different today?" I'd tell them there was no change. The company was still refusing. They would stop out another week. Three weeks they had been out when we held this meeting in Port Hedland. I got on this ute and reported to the blokes that there still had been no change. The company was making all sorts of threats of dismissals, kicking out of the houses, the usual tactics they arrive at. We had this discussion for a while, they moved to stay out another week. We timed it - it took us nine minutes to have

the meeting - about 600 guys involved. They stayed out another week, just like that. I used to hold a meeting in Port Hedland on a Thursday, then I'd drive out to the mine, Thursday night, getting out there Friday morning. Myself and a couple of reps. from Port Hedland jumped into my station wagon and went out to the mine. We'd pre-arranged with the combined union committee for a room in the Single Men's quarters. We get out there, and this Mahoney, the company Industrial Officer, I couldn't move but he'd know I was in the town. Somebody would go and tell him. They guys had forced the company to give me accommodation. I went to my room, then all the blokes would come in, a carton of beer in hand. No sooner were we all settled, then this Mahoney knocks on the door. He said, "One of the conditions, the company gave you this room is, that no union business be conducted in the quarters." They charged me \$2.00 a night. I said, "Who said anything about union business, can't you see the carton of beer. The boys are just having a beer with me." He went away nice and furious. After that the guys said, "Is it true that you had a mass meeting in Port Hedland and it took only nine minutes to decide to stay out another week." "Spot on," I replied. A fellow by the name of Charlie Cowan, our AWU rep., and a hell of a good bloke from the boilermakers both said, "Right, tomorrow morning you get up on that ute at the basketball court. We're going to beat nine minutes." You wouldn't believe it, next morning, there were about 400 of them at the meeting. When I told them I had nothing new to report, they voted to stay out as well. Four minutes, that meeting took. That really put the seal on it. They had another compulsory conference. This was when Terry Lynch first came over here. Up till that stage, the Employer's Federation was handling the mining companies' compulsory conferences and so on. Australian Mines and Metals hadn't really got started. Terry Lynch was over here, he worked for Hammersley, still works there. We get in this conference in Port Hedland. Eric Kelly was there, all the company representatives, Hedley Symons is up there with us. He worked with the AWU the, a good bloke, he worked for the metalies before joining us. He and I were fronting for the AWU with a couple of reps., all the other union blokes were there as well. About to start the conference and Kelly said, "Something has got me a bit beat. Before this conference starts, I want Mr Barr to explain to me, how 600 in Port Hedland put in nine minutes, and 400 men at the mine decide in four minutes, to consider the whole question of continuing the strike for a further week." I told him I had been holding regular meetings with the men, reporting to them about the conference. Telling them what had been happening, namely nothing. They had just pre-arranged that if I couldn't report anything to them, they had nothing to listen to, and therefore they just went back to the huts. I felt Kelly was really going to nail us after that one.

The incident I want to tell you now is about Transfield. They were doing the installations in Mt Newman Company, in Port Hedland, they had the crusher and all the other big equipment they needed. They had their workers in a camp in the light industrial area at South Hedland, which was opposite Poon's camp. We'd had some differences with Poons a few months before, but now we had pretty good conditions set up for the workers, as far as rooms and food were

concerned. The Transfield guys had a shocking mess and camp. Just the huts there, no footpaths around the place. Big holes, the blokes were falling in them all the time. The washing machines wouldn't work, the tucker was crook, the transport into town was unsafe, some would come in on the back of these utes without seats or anything to sit on. The blokes finally got sick of it and jacked up, the company wouldn't do anything about it. They had mainly Italians and Greeks working for them, a lot of them didn't really care, but there were a few spirited blokes among them, they got the rest to jack up. We had a meeting about it and they stopped work. The company thought they could pull the same trick they did in the old days in the Pilbara. You'd see companies sack whole gangs of men and put them on the road and get another gang in. I had a meeting with the company every day, couldn't get any concessions out of them. The blokes had been out three days, maybe four, then the company decided that they would sack the lot. I said, "That's all right, you sack them, but nothing else will happen. You won't get another crew in here. I'll just organise the Mt Newman workers, they won't allow any other crew to work on this site." This didn't seem to concern Transfield very much. Unbeknown to me, they rounded up all the blokes out of the camp where they were, had them all lined up, had all their pays made up. The police were there to stop any of them jacking up, refusing to leave the camp. One of the blokes rang me up, told me to get out there quick, told me what was happening. There was a hell of a good police sergeant in charge in Port Hedland. I went and had a talk with him first of all, explained the situation. He said, "Oh well, this is an industrial dispute, we can't interfere with it unless there's some civil disobedience, some misdemeanour or whatever." He said he would ring the two constables they had at the site. When I got out there, here's the pay clerk, the company manager sitting at the table, all the blokes lined up. These two policemen making them line up to collect their pay. I went straight up to the policemen, said to this constable, "You'd better get on the phone and speak to your sergeant." They did, and then they left. The company started to panic. I said to them, "You can't do this, it's just not on. You won't start again as far as we're concerned." Then they said, "What's going to happen to our plane?" "What plane?" I asked. They said, "It's just cost us \$35,000, the plane's on it's way from Perth to pick up all these men." so I then said, "Good, we'll go out to the airport to meet it, and tell it to get back to Perth airport." Which is exactly what happened. It was a DC3, it just carried fifty odd passengers. There were 53 guys, just a plane load. They were going to put the lot on and have them gone before anybody knew about it. Fortunately, we found out in time. Then we settled the dispute. The company knew they were gone. That was one of the tactics they used to try pull.

I remember in the early days, I'd be driving from Port Hedland down to Dampier. You'd get off that twelve mile turn off, there'd be 30 or 40 blokes sitting there looking for lifts. You'd ask then what happened. Some of these contractors would only have seven or eight days work, they'd have a bit of a barney on, so they would just sack the lot of them. They'd be gone, out of town before anybody knew about it. Dumped off at the twelve mile turnoff. This happened until we got the place organised. Even in the construction, we'd have combined

union committees, then they all started to look after one another. It was pretty hairy up there in the early days. Used to pull all those sorts of tricks.

"Malays" as indentured labour : Western Australia 1867-1900

Peter J. McGann*

The commercial development of Western Australia's pearling grounds began soon after the first European settlers moved to the Northwest in the early 1860s. An American named W.F. Tay, who had been party to a failed pastoral venture near Roebourne, some 1250 kilometres north of Perth, decided to retrieve some of his losses by exporting shell from the richly stocked mother-of-pearl banks located along the coastline flanking the port of Cossack.¹ Initially operations were confined to hand picking and dredging along the beaches at low tide, but as these banks were exhausted local Aborigines were recruited to dive for shell from small dinghies cruising the shallow waters off-shore. The enterprise proved to be highly lucrative, and the promise of easy profits attracted the attention of a number of the more successful pastoralists in the district. It soon became commonplace at the completion of each shearing season for almost everybody from the pastoral leases near Roebourne and Cossack to go out pearling.²

Throughout the 1870's, the fishery developed rapidly and soon came to rival pastoralism as the Northwest's major profit-making industry. Cossack grew in prominence as the fishery's headquarters and new pearling banks were opened up along the coastline, so that operations extended from Shark Bay in the south, to Condon, a small settlement near the mouth of the De Grey River, in the north.³ The expansion of pearling operations altered the structure of the industry. Ownership was now shared between the pastoralist-pearlers and several entrepreneurial adventurers, and sea-going vessels of between 10 and 50 tons began to supersede the small dinghies that were used during the 1860s.⁴ In the seven years from 1868 to 1875, the industry was transformed from a localised concern at Cossack employing twelve vessels and a workforce of about 90, to a major economic enterprise which was served by some 50 vessels and over 1,000 workers.⁵ The pastoralist-pearlers left the industry and ownership of the industry passed into the hands of master-pearlers who often had the backing of overseas financiers. Work was now concentrated around the rich banks of Roebuck Bay and on grounds as far removed as Cape Bossut and the Montebello Islands.⁶ Thus the basis was established for the continual development of an industry which was to provide substantial long term capital inflow for the economy of colonial Western Australia.

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From 1870 the Indonesian Archipelago became a prime recruiting ground for labour for Western Australia's fledgling pearl shell industry. Government legislation at the time had placed tight restrictions on the recruitment of local Aboriginal divers and, as Europeans were neither willing nor capable of fulfilling the role, Southeast Asia with its large pools of surplus maritime workers became the most logical alternative source of labour.⁷ The first recruits, who landed in the Northwest in late 1870, were inhabitants of the Lesser Sunda islands of Alor and Solor, and were signed by Captain Francis Cadell, master of the schooner "Waterlily", to work a period of twelve months in the colony. The venture proved to be a great success and at the end of the season the "Waterlily", along with several other vessels, returned to Eastern Indonesia, signing on more recruits at Kupang as well as in Singapore.⁸ As the industry grew, the post-season recruiting trips to Southeast Asia became commonplace and, by 1890, Australian vessels were obtaining recruits from a growing number of ports including Batavia, Makassar, Manila and Jolo, the capital of the Sulu chain of islands. In the three decades to 1900, thousands of these workers, often simply – but often mistakenly – referred to by Europeans as 'Malays' (for ethnically and culturally they were often diverse) were contracted from Southeast Asia and taken to the Northwest coast where they served various periods of indenture at pearling centres like Cossack, Shark Bay, Broome and Onslow.⁹

Recruiting was decidedly intermittent in pattern, determined by Southeast Asian considerations of accessibility and availability of labour as well as demand in the pearl shell industry. Thus at certain times, people of different ethnic backgrounds predominated. For instance, whilst skin diving was the main method of pearl shell procurement, there was a preponderance of recruits originating from the relatively large communities on the Lesser Sunda Islands, Java and Singapore. But as the industry rationalised, and new diving apparatus was introduced, larger numbers of recruits were shipped from the Philippine Islands. The changing patterns of recruitment reflected the particular skills and experience of recruits. Those from the western part of the Archipelago were thought to possess superior skin diving skills, whilst the Filipino-Tagalog and Bisayan – was considered more technologically minded and therefore better able to cope with any new diving apparatus such as helmets, suits and pumps.¹⁰ As the Filipino workers – or, to draw from the colonial idiom, 'Manillamen' – became more prominent, so their status within the pearling community grew; so much so in fact, that by the 1890s they could often be found in charge of pearling luggers, and commanding racially diverse crews which at times included other 'Malays'.¹¹

The early 'Malays' were very successful divers and became more competent as time went by. Unlike the local Aboriginal divers, the Alorese and Solorese workers were prepared to dive during the colder months and were considered to be more efficient, 'working in deeper water for longer periods'.¹² Their presence led to a significant increase in the take of shells in the

1871 season, and it was envisaged in pearling circles that the increased profits would more than adequately compensate for the extra costs associated with the introduction of this labour.¹³ Thus the demand for 'Malays' quickly grew and, by 1872, several vessels had mounted successful recruiting ventures to ports like Kupang, Batavia, Makassar and, to a lesser extent, Singapore. In 1873 there were about 150 'Malays' engaged in the industry on one or two year contracts, and working out of Shark Bay, Cossack and Condon. In 1874 the total rose to around 225, and in 1875 it was put officially at 989.¹⁴

From 1870 to 1874 the labour recruiters operated virtually unimpeded by any form of regulation. There were, of course, the agreements framed by the various colonial governments of Southeast Asia and signed by all parties prior to the 'Malays' departure. But these agreements carried little weight once the 'Malay' was in Australia.¹⁵ As well there were the provisions of the Pearl Shell Fishery Regulation Act which was promulgated in 1871, but which catered mainly for the welfare of Aborigines and offered little protection to the 'Malay'.¹⁶ This general lack of regulation engendered abuses in both Southeast Asia and on the pearling grounds. Some of the pearlers engaged in 'blackbirding', and unceremoniously plucked dozens of 'Malays' from their native lands.¹⁷ Others failed to provide their workers with adequate wages, food and shelter, whilst a few refused to return their 'Malays' to their place of origin on the completion of their indenture, a situation, when brought to the attention of the colonial authorities in Perth, caused them to pass the Imported Labour Registry Act, 1874.¹⁸

The Act required the employers of imported labour to compile lists of all foreign workers in their service. These lists, which were to include such details as the worker's name, age, origin, occupation and employer, were to be presented to the local Government Resident at the beginning of each new season.¹⁹ There were various fines for employers who filed incomplete lists, and the Colonial Secretary's Office hoped that these would help engender a new sense of responsibility in those involved. However, the remoteness of the pearling grounds, the less than diligent approach of local colonial officials, and the general apathy of the employers rendered the legislation almost useless.²⁰

Meanwhile, the Dutch authorities in Indonesia, from where most of the recruits were now coming, were becoming increasingly alarmed by the instances of abuse reported to them by workers returning from the pearling grounds. Towards the end of 1875, the Dutch Governor General in Batavia passed an Act which provided tight guidelines for any stranger wishing to take people from Indonesian ports to work as divers or boat-crew. The Act insisted that prospective employers make a proper, witnessed agreement with the divers, specifying the length of the contract.²¹ Anyone taking workers without such agreements faced a penalty of 300 florins – 24 pounds – per head. As well the Act required labour recruiters to pay a 200

florin – 16 pounds – deposit for each worker taken to Western Australia, which was to be forfeited if the employer failed to return the worker to his home port within thirteen months.²² The new Dutch policy was greeted with some consternation in Western Australia, and in January 1876 a deputation of persons with interests in the pearl shell industry called on Governor Robinson to voice their disapproval. Governor Robinson promised to make representation to the Dutch authorities through the British Consul in Batavia, with a view to having the exaction removed. He failed and the number of 'Malay' workers began to decline.

By 1876, there were still some 800 'Malays' working on the coast. But by 1877, when falling pearl shell prices made further recruitment of 'Malays' even less attractive, there were, according to the Government Resident at Roebourne, none. Aborigines once again came to dominate the industry's workforce, and few 'Malays' were employed until the 1883-1884 season.²⁵

Then the number rose significantly with the arrival of the large pearling schooners "Flowerdale" and "Sree Pas Sair" from Kupang.²⁶ These vessels were owned by wealthy English businessmen who were quite prepared to outlay large sums of money to procure suitable labour. Both vessels arrived in Eastern Indonesia around September 1883 and sailed to the island of Solor which is situated to the north of Timor. The "Flowerdale" shipped 72 Solorese divers, whilst the "Sree Pas Sair" shipped 61. Having observed all the conditions laid down by the Dutch Government, the vessels sailed for the Australian coastline, arriving just in time for the start of the new pearling season.²⁷

Early in April 1884, several of the Solorese on board "Sree Pas Sair" became ill with beri-beri and one of their number died. By April 12th another two had succumbed and, fearing further deaths, Chippendall decided to return the Solorese to their homes immediately. By the time "Sree Pas Sair" arrived at Kupang a total of fifteen had died. The "Flowerdale" had experienced similar problems, losing nineteen out of 72 Solorese originally shipped. The Solorese claimed that the "Flowerdale" had a ghost on board, "in the shape of an old sailor with a white beard and long knife". They refused to re-board the vessel for the trip from Kupang to Solor, choosing instead to travel on the "Sree Pas Sair", whose several deaths they attributed to evil spirits lurking along the coastline of New Guinea.²⁸ The "Flowerdale's" reputation as a ghost ship spread quickly through the Indonesian Islands, and her owners experienced great difficulty in recruiting further 'Malays'. On the other hand, the "Sree Pas Sair" was able to procure labour from several locations.²⁹

There were important developments in the regulation of labour imported into Western Australia in the 1880s. In 1881 an Inspector of Pearlshell Fisheries was appointed to police the industry

and to ensure the welfare of those employed in it.³⁰ And in 1882 the Legislative Assembly replaced the Imported Labour Registry Act of 1874 with the Imported Labour Registry Act, 1882.³¹ This was superseded in 1884 by another Act of the same name, which was to remain in place unaltered until 1897. Under the 1884 Act no imported Asian, African or South Sea Island worker was permitted to land in Western Australia without an approved contract. Each agreement was to be signed by all parties before the appropriate European official at the point of departure, and to bear his written approval.³² The documents were to contain the conditions of service – wages, advance, nature of work, food and accommodation – as well as a guarantee to provide the labourer with a return fare to his home port on the completion of his indenture. In some cases a deposit had to be paid for each recruit.³³ On arrival in Western Australia, the master of a vessel introducing imported labourers was expected to present the local officer of Customs or Police with a contract, medical certificate and list of details for every such person on board. Within two weeks of the imported labour being landed in the colony, the employer was required to appear before the Resident Magistrate at Derby, Cossack or Carnarvon to have the contracts countersigned. All contracts were to be subject to the provisions of the Western Australian Masters and Servants Act, and there were stiff penalties for the employer or labourer who broke his agreement.³⁴

The introduction of apparatus diving caused a transformation both of the industry and of the industry's labour force. By the end of the 1887-1888 season, when some 120 vessels were in operation, only two continued to employ the swimming–diving method which had been used from the industry's inception.³⁵ The Aboriginal divers, who had played such an important role in the swimming–diving era, were generally considered unsuitable for work on apparatus vessels and disappeared from the industry almost overnight. Similarly, divers from places like Sulu, Solor and Makassar became less popular, and by 1890 very few employers were importing men from these islands.³⁶ The modernized industry required workers who were able to cope with the new technology, and labour recruiters turned their attention to the large pools of surplus maritime labour available from the Philippines, the Straits Settlements, Java and Kupang. Of the more than 800 'Malay' workers engaged as divers, tenders or labourers along the Northwest coast in 1891, most originated from these ports.³⁷ The numbers stabilized until 1896-1897 when the demand for pearl shell declined and the numbers fell to about 500.

In 1897, the Legislative Assembly decided once again to amend the legislation controlling the impartation of indentured workers to Western Australia. The amended Act, the Imported Labour Registry Act, 1897, contained several clauses adopted from the recently passed Immigration Restriction Act, 1897, a Bill which dealt with immigration in general but which had no effect upon workers employed in the pearling industry. Under the amended Act, imported workers were no longer permitted to travel further south than the 26th Parallel, at

Shark Bay, and faced gaol terms deportation for any indiscretion. As well, the activities of labour recruiters were now confined to the ports of Singapore and Kupang, and only one indentured worker could be introduced for every 500 tons capacity of the ship transporting them to Australia. The employer was also liable to severe monetary penalties in Australia, as well as in Singapore and Kupang, if he failed to return his workers as promised.³⁸ Yet despite these restrictions, the number of 'Malays' employed in 1898 actually increased to around 600, and by 1900 had risen to over 1000.³⁹

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The work experiences of 'Malays' during the swimming–diving era were diverse, and were generally determined by the particular pearling grounds on which their European masters decided to operate. When the 'Malay' involvement began in the early 1870s, most of the industry's operations were being conducted in the waters of Shark Bay and Cossack, and there were distinct differences in the type of pearl shell each region produced and the manner in which it was obtained. At Shark Bay for instance the pearl-shell oyster was procured by dredging and wading in comparatively shallow waters. Further north at Cossack, a larger variety of pearl-shell oyster was found in deeper waters and was generally gathered by the swimming–diving method.⁴⁰

The operations at Shark Bay were carried on virtually uninterrupted all year long. Various sections of the inlet were sub-divided and leased to the pearl-ers who set up camps in the almost barren sandhills close to the beach. From here, work parties under the control of European overseers set out daily to gather shell from waters generally ranging from one to seven metres in depth. At low tide the "pearl-fishers" waded through the shallows collecting shell by hand from "pick-up" banks. The deeper reserves of shell were located in areas referred to as dredging grounds, and here the pearl shell was procured through the use of dredges towed behind sail and oar driven vessels.⁴¹ The work day lasted around ten hours and at dusk the 'Malay' waders and dredging crews returned to the pearling camps with their daily "take". The shell was then opened and the oyster removed and thrown into large iron containers known as "pogey pots" to die and rot away. After several days the putrefied mass was treated with sea water and drained before being raked and sifted through by workers seeking the small yellow seed pearls common to this species. Meanwhile other workers were engaged in cleaning and scraping the shell and then securing it in casks ready to be shipped to Fremantle or Singapore for sale.⁴²

At Cossack, where the swimming–diving technique of pearl shell procurement predominated, the work experiences of 'Malays' were somewhat different. It was generally a summer

occupation, as most skindivers were reluctant to enter the cold ocean waters common during the cool season.⁴³ The fleet assembled in port towards the end of September taking on provisions and signing on crews before setting sail for the grounds which might be located several miles out to sea. The size of a particular vessel's complement was usually determined by the number of working dinghies carried on board. For instance, a vessel with four dinghies would require a workforce of about 30.⁴⁴ This included the vessel's master, four white crewmen who doubled as dinghy hands, and 25 'Malay' or Aboriginal divers who, besides their diving duties, were expected to crew and maintain the 'mother ship' when she was under sail. On 'Malay' manned vessels, a serang – boatswain – was appointed as well to control the crew and to act as an interpreter for the whites.⁴⁵

Whenever a particular patch of shell was worked, most of the pearling vessels would congregate close together often 20 or 25 kilometres from the nearest land. Work on a typical 'Malay' manned schooner of the day began at dawn when the shell obtained on the previous day was scraped, opened, checked for pearls by the white crew members, and then stowed away. Breakfast consisting of rice, fish and bread, and occasionally salt beef and turtle was then served by the 'Malay' cook, after which the dinghies were made ready for the day's diving. The average day on the grounds lasted about eight hours although this sometimes varied according to tidal fluctuations which on the northern coast could be most substantial. Operations were supervised by the white dinghy hand, who stood at the rear of the boat with an oar protruding over the stern sculling against the tide. Six or seven divers squatted on the vessel's boards waiting for the signal to go over the side. The 'Malays' from Singapore and the Indonesian Islands preferred to enter the water feet first, thus avoiding the headache brought on by prolonged bouts of diving in head first. Divers from the Sulu Islands, however, thought this practice was quite unmanly and preferred to use the latter method. When the signal was given all of the divers went down together, partly to scare off any sharks that may have been lurking in the vicinity, and also to ensure that the bottom of the ocean was thoroughly examined. A diver could be underwater for one or two minutes working in depths of up to seven fathoms (twelve metres). Henry Taunton, who worked as a dinghy hand on board the schooner "Harriet" in the early 1880s, described a typical day's pearling:

At times, when the "patch" was small, the dinghy's of the whole fleet might be congregated on a very small area, in which case the scene was animated enough. On all sides you could see divers slipping into the water and others just coming to the surface, puffing, blowing, and coughing to clear their eyes, ears and mouth from the salt water – some with some without shells. Others would be swimming to regain their dinghy or squatting in their places for the few minutes rest permitted, and, if the wind were at all fresh, shivering with cold, for although the weather might be extremely hot, the constant plunging in and out for many hours at a time tended to reduce the body temperature considerably.⁴⁶

At the end of a day's work, it was quite common for dinghies to have drifted ten or twelve kilometres from the mother ship. This not only made the small boats vulnerable to any 'cock-eyed-bobs' (squalls) which might blow up, but also meant that the exhausted 'Malay' divers had to row the now substantially heavier dinghies back to the schooner. Once the journey was completed, the shell was unloaded and each diver's tally for the day recorded by the Captain. A diver was judged to have completed a fair day's work if he obtained one "pair" of shells for every eight times he entered the water. His daily take averaged between 10 and 20 "pairs". Those who did not perform to the Captain's requirements were given extra duties, such as scraping and washing the shell and cleaning and securing the dinghies for the night. An evening meal similar in content to breakfast was served around dusk, after which all hands retired to sleep until dawn, the whites sharing a small cabin and the 'Malays' lying scattered about the decks.

The process was repeated week after week, interrupted only by Sundays, which were designated days of rest, and by the ominous signs that heralded the approach of hurricanes which regularly visited the coast. Whenever the weather was particularly bad the fleet scattered for shelter in the numerous mangrove creeks located along the coastline. It was quite common for two or three vessels to remain laid up for several weeks in the fly and mosquito infested creeks, with their 'Malay' workers idle and the white crew members sitting around drinking, gambling and comparing pearls. When the weather moderated, the fleet regrouped and returned to the grounds to resume work.⁴⁷

Towards the end of April, the fleet made its way back to Cossack for the enforced winter lay-up. The pearl shell was offloaded and the ships' crews were paid off. Any 'Malays' who had completed their terms of indenture were, in most cases, returned to their places of origin whilst those with time to serve were allocated various on-shore tasks such as carrying out any necessary repairs to the fleet's schooners, cutters and dinghies, or fetching water and firewood to last the community through the cooler months ahead.⁴⁸

The 1880s saw several changes in the pearling industry, most of which were brought about by the successful introduction of diving apparatus. All diving operations were now carried out from sea-going luggers of up to 20 tonnes. These vessels were two-masted craft, generally around twelve metres in length and two metres across the beam, which were especially designed to allow heavily weighted divers to enter and leave the water with freedom.⁴⁹ Some pearlery operated with only one lugger. However most owned five to fifteen craft which were attached to schooners which served as floating craft whilst the fleet was at sea.⁵⁰ The average lugger carried a complement of seven, including the diver who was usually a 'Manillaman' – (a Filipino), a tender of the same nationality and five deckhands. Some crews were comprised

completely of 'Manillamen', whilst others were of mixed nationality and included 'Malays' from Singapore, Kupang and Java, as well as Chinese, Japanese and South Sea Islanders.⁵¹

The new mode of operations brought a change to the timing of the pearling season. The diving suits provided their wearers with protection from the cold, and thus most of the work was now carried out in the cool season.⁵² The schooner and her fleet of luggers generally sailed to the grounds in late April. The mother ship cast anchor and the luggers were loaded with enough provisions for a week's cruising.⁵³ The diver, who was in charge of the lugger's operations, knew by experience where the pearl shell was most abundant and set the vessel's course accordingly. Once over suitable ground the lugger's sails were taken in and the vessel securely anchored, whilst the tender and another crew member helped the diver to prepare for his descent.

Dressing for the dive was a drawn out affair. Firstly the diver would apply several layers of underclothes which provided him with extra insulation from the cold. He then climbed into the rubber and canvas diving dress through a hole in the neck. Large, heavily weighted boots were then added and a copper and brass collarette was passed over the diver's head. A coir life-line was attached to his waist and the diver crawled over the side of the lugger and stood partly submerged on a ladder made from wood or rope. Here several lead weights were strapped to the suit and the diver was given another line to guide his descent to the bottom. The brass helmet complete with air hose was then attached to the studs of the collarette, the glass face plate screwed in and the signal given to commence pumping. Moments later the diver began his descent to the depths below leaving a trail of large bubbles on his way. On reaching the ocean floor he performed the important task of adjusting the air valves which gave him the right balance and pressure.

When the diver was below the tender took charge of operations on deck and the rest of the crew followed his orders. His main responsibility was to ensure that the pumpers provided a steady flow of air to the diver. As well he had to carry out any instructions sent up to him via the diver's signal line.⁵⁴ Most of the work took place in depths of around fifteen fathoms (28 metres) and a dive generally lasted the time it took the diver to fill his shell sack. The lugger was usually allowed to drift with the tide, and the diver was drawn along by his life-line scooping up shell as he went. When he was ready to ascent, he tugged on the signal line and was hauled to the surface by several crew members. The diver tested while the crew manoeuvred the lugger to the next known patch of shell and then entered the water again.⁵⁵ At dusk the work was suspended and the equipment and pearl shell stowed away.

On Saturday, the luggers returned to their mother ship to deliver their "take". The shell was cleaned and opened and any pearls that were found were secured by the schooner's captain. Sunday was a rest day, and the fleet's European workers generally congregated together on the schooner, while the 'Malays' and other non-whites spent their time on the luggers. By Monday morning stores had been issued for the next week's work, and the luggers set sail for the pearling grounds once more.⁵⁶ This pattern continued through until late November when the vessels began to disperse and prepare for the hurricane season.

Working on the pearling fields was dangerous and the old graveyards of the Northwest provide stark testimony of the terrible toll exacted from indentured 'Malays' and other workers during the late nineteenth century. Indeed between 1870 and 1900 the Northwest pearl-shell fishery gained a reputation for having claimed more lives and incapacitated more workers than any of Western Australia's other industries, including mining.⁵⁷ The high rates of mortality, injury and sickness were due mainly to the harsh conditions under which the industry's workforce laboured. As well as toiling for long hours in the oppressive heat which was part of the tropical environment for most of the year, workers were often exposed to debilitating diseases caused by poor diet and unsanitary conditions, serious mishaps due mainly to mismanagement and poor equipment and the devastating effects of tropical cyclones.⁵⁸

Unhealthy conditions prevailed both at sea and on shore. The pearling vessels were cramped and usually provided no separate living or sleeping quarters for the crews. Crew members slept wherever they could find room to lie down amongst the equipment and pearl shell that cluttered the decks.⁵⁹ After several weeks at sea the vessels reeked with the pungent odours of dead and decaying oysters and were infested with flies and cockroaches which bred prolifically in the hot climate.⁶⁰ Diseases such as dysentery, diarrhoea and gastro-enteritis spread almost unchecked throughout the pearling fleets. As well constant exposure to the elements made workers prone to severe and lingering colds which often turned to pneumonia. On shore workers contracted deadly strains of malaria from the plagues of mosquitoes which bred in the mangrove swamps and were exposed to an array of sexually transmitted diseases,⁶¹ although the most serious malady to affect 'Malays' was the vitamin deficiency illness known as beri-beri. Some pearlery attempted to overcome the problem by feeding their workers with flour, fresh vegetables and meat. However most of them balked at the expense and 'Malays' continued to succumb to the disease in large numbers well into the 20th century.⁶²

The change from swimming-diving to apparatus-diving in the mid-1880s introduced new hazards to the workers' health. Although it was generally accepted that the maximum safe operating depth for apparatus divers was about eighteen fathoms (33 metres) many worked for prolonged periods in depths of up to 30 fathoms (55 metres).⁶³ In 1890, Roebourne's Medical

Officer, J. Frizell, investigated the diseases resulting from deep diving. In his report he found that the activity induced four major complaints: rupture of the ear membrane which caused deafness; hypertrophy – abnormal swelling of body organs; rheumatism; and paralysis of the lower extremities with that of the bowel and bladder. The latter was the most serious of these diseases and was responsible for killing and permanently maiming many workers.⁶⁴ When a diver worked in deep waters he was subjected to enormous pressure which forced nitrogen through the lungs and into the blood-stream. If he ascended from the depths too quickly the gas formed bubbles in the blood which could cause severe damage.⁶⁵ In many cases divers were pulled from the water dead, with their features crushed beyond recognition. "Their stomachs had been forced into their chest cavities, their faces were bloated, tongues black and swollen and eyes almost forced out of their sockets".⁶⁶ Although the diver was also prone to numerous other mishaps such as having his life-line fouled on rocks or cut, and attacks by large sea-creatures, his deadliest enemy was always paralysis.⁶⁷

A large percentage of the 'Malays' who died on the Northwest coast between 1870 and 1900 were victims of tropical cyclones.⁶⁸ Winds of up to 250 kilometres per hour were not unknown and were always accompanied by torrential downpours. Towns like Cossack and Roebourne were occasionally flattened. The barometer gave pearl-ers about ten hours' notice of an approaching 'blow', which was usually enough time for the fleets to scatter for shelter in the many bays and mangrove creeks along the coastline.⁶⁹ However at times large numbers of vessels were caught in the open and attempted to ride the storm out. Some of the smaller craft were unstable even in calm waters and quickly succumbed to the mountainous seas and howling gales. Many of the large pearling schooners shared the same fate. A particularly severe cyclone swept Exmouth Gulf in January 1876, sinking four schooners and drowning 69 men most of whom were 'Malays'. Another occurred in 1881 sinking twelve schooners and killing all on board. However the damage inflicted during these storms was relatively modest when compared to the ravages of what came to be known as the big blow of 1887. This cyclone struck the pearling grounds in late April when the stormy season was presumed to be over. Although the falling barometer and overcast conditions provided the pearl-ers with adequate warnings of an impending blow, most of the fleets' vessels remained at work on the grounds near Wallel off the Eighty Mile Beach. The results were disastrous. Eighteen luggers and four schooners sank at their moorings and more than 140 men, predominantly 'Malays', perished.⁷⁰

Given the risks involved in the job the 'Malays' were not well paid. Their wages varied according to the era in which they were employed and the particular tasks that each worker performed. In the 1870s, for instance, divers and labourers recruited from Eastern Indonesia and Singapore were paid at a rate of about £1.10.0 per month plus food, shelter and clothing. They also received a small bonus for every 60 kilogrammes of pearl shell taken. The only

differentiation occurred in the case of the 'Malay' serang-boatswain – who received £2.12.0 per month plus bonuses for his extra responsibilities as interpreter, and for supervising the activities of the other 'Malay' crew members.⁷¹ These rates of pay remained unchanged throughout the first ten years of 'Malay' employment, but increased in the early 1880s when 'Malays' could earn between two and five pounds a month, plus a monthly bonus of two pounds for every tonne of pearl shell procured.⁷²

As the industry rationalized, a new system of profit sharing was set in place. The system was especially advantageous to 'Malays' employed as divers. Although his basic rate was only £2 per month, the diver was also entitled to a "lay" of £20 per tonne of pearl shell procured.⁷³ This enabled the more proficient diver, who averaged a take of one tonne of shell per month over a nine or ten month period, to earn in excess of £200 a year.⁷⁴ 'Malays' employed as tenders or ordinary boat-crew were paid substantially less. A tender received £4 per month and in some cases a share of the diver's lay, whilst boat-crew and labourers were paid a flat rate of £1.10.0 a month. The latter rate of pay which applied to the majority of the industry's 'Malay' workers prevailed well into the 1890s, and was changed only after prospective employees in Singapore refused to sign agreements until they were guaranteed the £8.0.0 per month paid to European seamen on the Australian coast.⁷⁵

'Malays' were brought to Western Australia as cheap labour and most of them were paid accordingly. Despite the long hours, poor conditions, and grave dangers that characterized the work they performed, few – with notable exception of apparatus divers – were able to earn more than a third of what the odd European fulfilling similar duties was paid. However, most indentured 'Malay' workers were drawn from extremely poor villages and towns, and the two or three pounds they received each month was far in excess of anything they could hope to earn at home. Those who managed to accumulate a reasonable sum of money during their service in Western Australia could live in relative prosperity on their return, and at the same time provide an important boost to village and family economies.⁷⁶

* * * * *

The pressures of life on the pearling grounds brought various responses from 'Malays'. Many simply accepted their situation and served out their indentures virtually without complaint. Some sought to relieve the tension with alcohol and opium⁷⁷; whilst others tried to improve their lot or terminate unhappy relationships with European employers by going on strike, deserting and, on occasions, by violence. The willingness of 'Malays' to assert themselves and to take positive action drew the ire of their employers and made them liable to severe punishments from the generally unsympathetic colonial officials of the North.

On 11 February 1874, fourteen 'Malay' crew-members of the schooner "Waterlily" were brought before a Justice of the Peace at Cossack, charged by the vessel's master, Charles Peterson, with having 'combined to disobey his orders and mutinous and insubordinate conduct'. The charges followed an incident that occurred during the previous week when the "Waterlily" was at Bedoub Island, some 250 kms to the north-east of Cossack, taking on water. Peterson told the enquiry:

On Monday morning 2nd February the "Waterlily" was at Bedoub, we were filling our water casks. I had 13 or 14 Malays and one white man ashore with me.

At about 3 pm I went to the water hole and found a Malay named Ramsammy idle. I told him to fill the water bucket; he did not do so. I picked up a small reed and hit him on the back with it. He then walked away towards the bush saying he would not go on board. I caught him by the arm and brought him back to the water hole. There he put the bailer into the water hole and brought up a bailer full of dirt. Again I hit him with the reed. He again got up to go away. I caught him by the back of the neck. He called out and I let him go. Ramsammy then walked away towards the bush.

I went on aboard the "Waterlily" with the water boat. I had search made for him till 10 pm and the next morning until 8 pm but he could not be found.

Following his unsuccessful search for the 'Malay', Peterson decided to leave Bedoub Island and return to the pearling grounds. With the "Waterlily" securely at anchor he asked the Serang, Doolsahmet, to muster the rest of the crew for work. Doolsahmet informed Peterson that the other 'Malays' were incensed by his treatment of Ramsammy 'and would do no more diving'. Shortly afterwards another European, James Brown, told the Captain that he had overheard the 'Malays' plotting to seize the "Waterlily" and sail it to Java. Peterson then decided to ask for assistance from a British naval vessel, the "Beagle", which was anchored nearby. A boat was dispatched to take Ramsammy off Bedoub, and two men were placed on board the "Waterlily" to deal with any disturbance. The "Waterlily" made its way back to Cossack without further incident.

In his evidence, Peterson told Justice of the Peace R.J. Sholl that the strike by the 'Malays' was completely unjustified. He described the fracas with Ramsammy as minor, and added that in the six months since they were recruited from Singapore, the 'Malays' had been well paid, adequately clothed and fed, and had never been ill-treated. His testimony was supported by the other white crewmen, but contrasted sharply with statements given by the 'Malays' in their defence. Their evidence provides a rare insight of the thoughts of indentured 'Malays' on the nineteenth century pearling grounds:

- Radjupp — I was near and saw Captain Peterson seize Ramsammy by the back of the neck and by the throat with two hands. I saw a little blood come from his nose. I was in the hold with Assan. I did not hear Assan say a word about the ease with which the ship could be seized and taken to Java.
- Doolsahmet — I refused to dive because Ramsammy was ashore and because some Malays died.
- Jambool — I did not dive because Ramsammy was ashore. The Captain struck me with his hands.
- Ambar — My friend was on shore and I could not work.
- Boontal — My friend was on shore and the Captain was always making rows and so I could not dive.
- Assan — We all wanted to work when we left Singapore but the Captain made rows and we would not work.
- Kitchie — I have been at work for three months and my eyes got bad. I refuse to dive because my eyes are bad.
- Ramsammy — I ran away because I thought I might as well die on shore as on board the ship and I could not bear it any longer. I was sick and the Captain made me sit in the stern in the sun and called the men aft and told them not to give me any rice. I was sick all over. I did not dive when I was sick I cleaned shells.

The enquiry found no basis for the charge of mutinous conduct, but convicted eleven of the 'Malays' for disobedience. Nine were fined and cautioned, and two, Doolsahmet and Ramsammy, were given fourteen days' imprisonment with hard labour.⁷⁸

There are numerous other reports of 'Malays' attempting to gain redress by withdrawing their labour. For example, in September 1874, 25 'Malays' working at Shark Bay struck after their employer, Charles Broadhurst, refused to pay them.⁷⁹ In mid-1888 several workers employed by Pead and Co., refused to carry out certain tasks which they felt were extraneous to their agreements.⁸⁰ In August 1891 the 'Malay' crew of the schooner "Iolanthe" struck because their employer, George Dewar, would not recognise that their time was up and refused to pay them off;⁸¹ and in 1898 several 'Malays' working to the south of Shark Bay, withdrew their labour and had the 'temerity' to voice their grievances in a petition presented to the British Government Resident in Singapore.⁸²

It was common for 'Malays', discontented with the rigours and tedium of life on the pearling grounds, to abscond from service. Indeed, the Police and Court records of the Northwest, particularly those dealing with the apparatus era, show the desertion was the single most common offence committed by indentured 'Malays'. The colonial Government took a dim view of offenders and tried to contain wayward workers by invoking harsh penalties to deal with

them. Whenever a worker went missing, his employer advised the local authorities who then issued a warrant for his arrest. The police generally had little trouble rounding up absconders, most of whom headed straight for the pearling settlements.⁸³ Once in custody, the offender was brought before a magistrate who fined, cautioned or imprisoned him depending on his previous record. Despite this, many 'Malays' deserted frequently and some elected to spend the whole of their period of indenture in prison. This caused employers great consternation; as by law they were required not only to bear the costs of any prosecutions, but had to pay for the prisoners' upkeep in prison, as well as repatriate them to their homes once their sentences were completed.⁸⁴

Between 1870 and 1900 there were two violent mutinies aboard pearling vessels in Western Australian waters, both involving workers from the Indonesian Archipelago. The first took place on board the schooner "Gift" in 1872. The vessel had arrived on the pearling grounds near Condon Creek, some 230 kilometres north-east of Cossack, on 20 October with a complement of six Europeans and 37 'Malays', most of whom were from Makassar and Alor. Operations had commenced immediately and after four days of work the divers had procured a good 'take' of pearl shell and trepang. According to one of the vessel's owners, George Roe, everything had gone smoothly and there were no apparent signs of dissatisfaction amongst the 'Malays'. Thus there was no warning of the events that were to unfold on the night of 26 October.⁸⁵

George Roe's account of the "Gift" mutiny was published in the Inquirer of 26 December 1872. He wrote:

We all, retired to rest at 9 o'clock. Laite (the cook) and the cabin-boy slept in the forecabin; myself and Frank Roy (sailor) in the cabin. P. Passey (owner) and R. Christie (master) were sleeping close to the cabin door, on deck. About 11 o'clock I was awakened by cries from Passey, and not knowing what was the matter, I was about to get up, when he fell off the steps on top of me. I asked him what was the matter; he replied: "the Makassar men have broken out, and tried to kill me". I at once aroused Roy, who said, "Give me a revolver" (they were on my side). Before we could realize our position, they endeavoured to finish us. The mondor (boatswain) made four attempts to drive a whale lance through me; three went through my mattress, and the fourth struck poor Passey, who was laying at my feet, apparently dying.⁸⁶

The three Europeans were besieged in the cabin for about an hour while the 'Malays' hurled a variety of missiles including harpoons, boat hooks and firewood at them. Finally Roe and Roy managed to drive the attackers towards the vessel's bow with revolver fire, thus gaining access to a dinghy which was tied to the stern. While Roy kept the mutineers at bay, Roe placed the wounded Passey and Christie in the boat. The cabin-boy, who was also wounded, and the cook then made their way astern and shortly afterwards the sic Europeans pulled away from the

"Gift" amid a final barrage from the 'Malays'. The dinghy headed towards another pearling schooner which was anchored about two miles away, while the 'Malays' on board the "Gift" set sail and made off towards Timor.⁸⁷

When news of the mutiny reached Roebourne's Government Resident, R.J. Sholl, he was outraged. The schooner "Banningarra" was immediately dispatched to pursue and, if possible, return the "Gift" to Cossack. The mission was unsuccessful and another vessel, the "Clarice", was then chartered and sent to Kupang to present the Dutch Resident with a letter describing the mutiny and asking for his assistance in apprehending those responsible. Towards the end of December 1872, the Dutch Resident informed Sholl that the "Gift" had been discovered anchored near the island of Kalaotoa, to the north of Timor, and that the mutiners were in custody. Depositions were then taken from the "Gift's" white crew-members and forwarded to Kupang for use as evidence against the prisoners. They were all convicted for piracy and sentenced to death.⁸⁸

The violence on board the "Gift" exacted a heavy toll from both the Europeans and 'Malays'. The vessel's master Christie, who along with Passey was severely injured in the affray, died of his wounds ten days later. Passey, who suffered thirteen different injuries, was permanently maimed. Six 'Malays' were reportedly killed by Roe and Roy and many others were known to have been wounded.⁸⁹

The blame for all of this destruction was placed firmly at the feet of the 'Malays', and the available evidence, which it must be said is all of European origin, seems to support this. Perhaps a 'Malay' account of events could provide a different reason for what appears to have been a night of insanity.

The other violent rebellion occurred on board the brigantine "Ethel", in October 1899. The "Ethel" was owned and commanded by Captain J.A. Riddell, and carried a mixed complement of about sixty men which included two other Europeans, the Captain's son Jack and a carpenter, as well as a large number of 'Malays' from Singapore and Manila, and a few Chinese, Japanese and Aborigines.⁹⁰ In the early morning hours of 20 October, while the "Ethel" lay at anchor off Eighty Mile Beach, a row broke out between the Captain and some of the 'Manillamen'. Shots were fired and in the aftermath the three Europeans on board lay dead. Six armed 'Manillamen', led by Peter Peres and Pedro de la Cruz, then seized the "Ethel" and, after dispatching the bodies of the three dead whites to the depths, forced the remainder of the crew to assist them in sailing the vessel northwards.⁹¹ Whilst en route for the island of Tanimbar Island was sighted the "Ethel" was scuttled and the mutineers and the other crew-members made their way ashore in the ship's small boats. The mutineers attempted to pass

themselves off as shipwreck victims, but were exposed by the "Ethel's" Chinese cook Pooh Ah Ming. The six were arrested and taken to Makassar and later extradited to Perth for trial.⁹²

The trial took place at the Perth Criminal Court in June 1900, with Mr. Justice Hensmen presiding. The six 'Manillamen' faced five separate indictments of murder on the high seas. The Court dealt firstly with Captain Riddell's death.⁹³ The prosecution's chief witness was Pooh Ah Ming, and his evidence which was corroborated by the "Ethel's" cabin-boy, Tan Ah Que, painted a damning picture of violence by the accused. He did, however, have some kind words for one of their number, Jean Baptiste, who had once saved his life.⁹⁴ In their defence, the two ringleaders, Peres and de la Crus, admitted being involved with the Captain's demise, but claimed that they were only defending themselves after the younger Riddell began firing a pistol at them. The other four accused – Baptiste, Maximino Royaz, Hugo Magdalogo and Sebio Garcia – said that they were asleep when the killings took place, a claim which was supported by de la Crus. Although the Court accepted this, it was felt that enough evidence existed to convict three of the men – Baptiste, Royaz and Magdalogo – by association. The other 'Manillaman', Sebio Garcia, was discharged. On the fifth day of the trial the jury retired and, after deliberating for two hours, returned a verdict of guilty of willful murder against all five prisoners. Justice Hensman then sentenced them to death.⁹⁵

Captain Riddell certainly played a part in his own death. He is generally depicted in the literature as the respectable, well-regarded master-pearler, yet in the fourteen years he worked on the Northwest coast, he developed a questionable reputation. For instance, he ran a "slop chest" aboard the "Ethel", which dispensed beer, gin, rum and tobacco amongst the workers. The "slop chest" was opened up on weekends when the luggers were alongside the mother-ship taking on stores, and the crews were encouraged to purchase large volumes of alcohol at inflated prices. Riddell ran a credit system and recorded each "slop chest" transaction as a cash advance. Only men with good buying records were retained at a season's end; and Riddell flatly refused to employ whites or anyone else who preferred their wages in cash.⁹⁷ Thus his workforce was made up of heavy drinkers who invariably found themselves deeply in debt at the end of their engagement. Riddell's work practices, which blatantly ignored the provisions of the Imported Labour Registry Act, were a recipe for disaster; and must have been a major contributing factor in the chain of events that led the five 'Manillamen' to the condemned cells at Fremantle Gaol in the winter of 1900.⁹⁸

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The contribution of 'Malays' to Western Australia's development was significant. It was the 'Malays' not, as it is sometimes assumed, the Japanese, who comprised the greater part of the

Asian labour force recruited by the pearling industry during the late nineteenth century. They came to the colony in their thousands from ports throughout the Indonesian Archipelago, and served in numerous capacities in both the swimming–diving and apparatus–diving eras. The conditions under which they worked were far from ideal. They faced a harsh, uncompromising, tropical environment, which made the long, lonely, dangerous months on the pearling grounds exceedingly uncomfortable. Hundreds of 'Malays' died violently or succumbed to disease, whilst hundreds of others became permanently incapacitated. The wages were generally low, the food and clothing provided was often inadequate, and 'Malays' were sometimes left stranded in pearling towns by employers who refused to return them to their homes. Nevertheless while some 'Malays' were prepared to accept their situation, others were prepared to strike, desert and occasionally mutiny. They deserve to have their past in Western Australia's labour history recovered.

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Introduction

The CCH Australian Employment Law Guide defines picketing in the following terms:

"Picketing is an industrial tactic involving the physical presence of strikers outside a worksite.

Picketing may also involve blockading the access and/or egress of all or certain persons attempting to enter or leave the worksite.

The purposes are usually to disrupt any work which may be still carried on at the worksite and to publicise the demands of the picketing workers. (CCH, p78,403)."

This paper concerns one such picket line. Not as one might expect a picket line outside a building site or outside the factory gates. This picket line instead was outside an outer suburban Perth high school. It was made up, not of building workers or factory workers, but of fifteen middle aged, part-time, female cleaners. These cleaners (members of the Federated Miscellaneous Workers' Union of Australia), manned a picket line outside the Safety Bay High School twenty four hours a day for five days and four nights in November 1987 in what ultimately was a successful attempt to save their jobs.

The paper examines the experience of the women who took part in the picket line and the factors that motivated such a group, who had never previously mounted any form of industrial action, to take such action. The paper also examines the roles played by the other participants in the affair, the school Principal, the teachers, the students and the community generally.

Background

Up until October 1987 the cleaning contract at the Safety Bay High School was held by the Electrolux Cleaning Company. The company employed fifteen female cleaners at the school with hours varying from ten to twelve and a half per week. The contract was due to expire on Friday October 30, 1987. Electrolux were not the successful tenders, however, and the contract was awarded to another contractor - the Exclusive Cleaning Company.

On Tuesday October 27, 1987 Electrolux informed their 15 employees of some six to nine years service that it had not been successful in renewing the contract and that it did not have any other work in the area to offer them. Effectively then the workers were made redundant.

The Federated Miscellaneous Workers' Union (FMWU) as was custom and practice, had been given prior knowledge of the change in contractor and it was expected, again as custom and practice that these employees would be picked up by the incoming contractor although not

* This paper was first prepared as an assignment in the Labour History Course in the Masters in Industrial Relations programme at the University of Western Australia

necessarily at the same hours. If the incoming contractor wished to make any changes to the staffing levels these would be made at a later time and would be effected by natural attrition.

The contractor met with the employees and the union at the school on Wednesday October 28. The contractor outlined a proposal for five cleaning positions at three and a half hours each. The cleaners indicated a preference for two hour positions, in order that more people could obtain employment, but the contractor did not favour that arrangement.

The cleaners explained to the contractor about the commitments they had, the need for employment and the high unemployment in the area. The union indicated that custom and practice dictated that the incoming contractor should consider the needs of the existing cleaning staff. The contractor, however, indicated that he was not going to be dictated to by the women, the union, the Ministry of Education or the Government.

The cleaners filled out applications for employment and the contractor indicated that he would contact the successful applicants. The cleaners decided to convene a further meeting on Friday October 30. On that day, spurred on by the fact that 'their' jobs had been advertised in the local paper that day they made a unanimous decision to mount an industrial campaign to obtain their jobs back. The decision the workers made was to camp at the school and not let anybody else clean the school. Diane Rowe (organiser for the Miscellaneous Workers' Union) points out that this was a decision initiated by the workers themselves not by the union and it was an indication of the depth of feeling amongst the workers.

On Monday morning November 2, 1987 at 6.00am the cleaners formed a picket line (with the aid of the union's banner) across the entrance to the school. An early decision was made to continue their action indefinitely and man (or woman!) the picket line for twenty four hours a day in an effort to prevent the new contractor from coming on site.

On Wednesday November 4, when it seemed that little progress was being made, a meeting of all government cleaners in the 17 surrounding schools was convened at the picket line. The outcome of that meeting was an almost unanimous decision to strike in support of the contract cleaners and to reconvene in twenty four hours to reconsider their position. There was strong criticism of the government for not considering the plight of the existing cleaners in awarding it's contract. There was also a renewed call to remove all contractors from schools. In the meantime the picket line continued.

On one occasion the contractor did gain access to the site with the assistance of police. He and his family attempted to clean the site but did so under extremely intimidating circumstances. He did not return to the site again.

The contractor filed an application for a compulsory conference at the Western Australian Industrial Relations Commission and on Thursday November 5 whilst the picket line continued, the parties ie. the union, the contractor and the Ministry of Education commenced negotiations in the Commission. Negotiations continued on into Friday and finally late on Friday afternoon the following solution was reached:

1. The Exclusive Cleaning Company to withdraw from the contract at Safety Bay High School.
2. The five most senior cleaners to given permanent 'government' jobs in surrounding schools in the area.
3. The 'Key Lady' (another employee of the school facing redundancy) also to be given a permanent government job in a surrounding area.
4. The ten most junior cleaners to go back to Safety Bay High School as cleaners with a new contractor under a new contract.
5. The Ministry of Education would give a guarantee that the Department would, in future, provide a redundancy clause to protect service and conditions of employees in future school contracts.

These resolutions from the cleaners' and the union's point of view were a major victory for all concerned with five women gaining permanent government employment and the rest securing their jobs at the school with a new contractor.

The Decision to Picket

In examining the issues concerned with this dispute the first question that crosses ones mind is why fifteen women, part-time employees working between ten and twelve and one half hours per week, who had never previously been involved in industrial action would mount such an action. I put that question to Diane Rowe and her answer was that most were motivated by purely economic reasons. All the cleaners had commitments to meet and some who were supporting mothers could not afford to be unemployed. Diane indicated that it was the cleaners who made the decision to picket the school. She says they were adamant that they weren't going to let anyone else clean the school.

Diane said that on the first day she spoke to women about going home at 6.00 or 7.00 pm and coming back the next day. The women said no. They said that they had made a commitment and they weren't going to let anyone else, especially the contractor get on site to do the cleaning. They said that they would stay there twenty four hours if necessary to prevent that happening . After the second day they felt their decision had been vindicated because the contractor had on two occasions come during the early hours of the morning in an attempt to gain access to the site.

I put the same question as to what motivated the cleaners to take the action they did to one of the cleaners involved in the dispute, Margaret Maley. She confirmed that for at least three of the girls their wage was the only wage coming into the household. She said they were desperate to retain their jobs.

Margaret adds, however, that it was their treatment by the incoming contractor that most inflamed the situation. She said that when they approached the contractor and asked if he was going to take them on he indicated that he would have to interview each of them individually and ascertain whether they had enough experience. The cleaners some of whom had been employed for some six to nine years considered this an insult. Nonetheless they filled out applications for employment with the new contractor. When they saw their advertised in the local paper the next day the women were furious. It was clear to them, Margaret says, that he had placed the advertisement sometime previous to his conversation with them and he had no intention of considering their applications.

Margaret also points out that they had nothing to lose. They had already been made redundant and at worst they would stay redundant. She said that overall they felt that they had done nothing wrong but had still lost their jobs. As Diane Rowe pointed out the women were retrenched in November just prior to Christmas. For many of them it was truly a case of (as their placard indicated) 'no job - no Merry Christmas!'

The Picket Line

The central area of interest in this dispute was the picket line. In their decision to form the picket line the women were unanimous - all 15 took part. A caravan, station wagons and vans were used to sleep in. People were given the opportunity to go home and sleep if they wanted to but the picket line was manned twenty four hours per day. Most, Diane said, stayed at the line because they were afraid they might miss some of the action if they left. At night the picketers sat around an open fire and sang and told jokes. At least four people were awake at any point during the night.

The picket line had a number of effects. First and most importantly the contractor was prevented from coming onto the site and cleaning the school (apart from the one occasion when he gained entry with the assistance of police). Secondly, the picket prevented supplies being delivered to the canteen, Transport Workers' Union members refusing to cross the picket line. Teachers, however, were still allowed entry to the site but were requested not to undertake duties normally undertaken by the cleaners. The cleaners resolved that the childrens' education should not suffer as a result of the imposition of the picket line. As a result they gave permission to the teachers to obtain cleaning equipment to clean the gymnasium for the Graduation Ceremony.

When I asked Margaret as to what was her experience of the picket line she indicated that overall it was a very frightening but nonetheless very rewarding experience. She said that whilst they received a lot of support from the community generally they also received a lot of abuse.

Some parents of students were angry because the toilets etc. were not being cleaned. When the cleaners' plight was explained, however, most she says were sympathetic. At times she says they were also subjected to intimidation by some of the students who would drive past and throw water bombs and flour bombs.

Another aspect of the dispute the women found frightening was the media attention. Margaret says at time she thought she was making a fool of herself, all over a mere ten hour a week job. She found herself hiding in bushes to avoid TV cameras. Another aspect that she says was disturbing were the inaccuracies in the press reporting. She says that the picketers were blamed for many things that the students had done such as turning off the water.

One of the interesting features of the picket line for these women was the role reversal it involved. Here for once in their lives it was they who were manning a picket line whilst their husbands were at home looking after the kids. For a change it was the husbands who were bathing the kids and reading them bedtime stories. It was they who were bringing their wives something to eat, bringing down thermos of coffee or coming down to kiss their wives goodnight. Some who

thought their husbands were extremely dependent found to their delight that their husbands could be self-sufficient when pressed.

Diane Rowe indicated that the women gained a lot of personal satisfaction out of the picket line. Most were frightened of what their husbands would think but this was very much a workers' area and the husbands worked for Alcoa and other traditional workers' places. Their husbands in fact were very proud of what they were doing and the fact that they were doing it on their own. Margaret supports this view. She says her husband was a bit hesitant about the twenty-four-hour picket at first. When she reminded him, however, how she supported him whenever he went on strike he became supportive.

The Other Parties

It is also interesting to examine the roles played by others during this dispute, and the reactions to the picket line.

The Principal

In his letter to parents (letter - R Harwood, 2 November 1987) R Harwood Acting Principal of Safety Bay High School indicated that "I am sympathetic to any worker who loses their job but the dispute is one between the Miscellaneous Workers' Union and the Ministry of Education." He went on to add that "In these difficult circumstances we are attempting to keep the school running as normally as possible (ibid)".

When I asked Diane Row what the Principal's attitude was to the picket line she indicated that he openly condemned the action. The principal, she said, did not live in the area and believed the Ministry had the right to do whatever it wanted to. He instructed the teachers not to get involved and threatened to discipline them if they did. He also issued a directive to the students not to become involved. This, Diane said, showed his naivety. After all some of the students were the children of the women on the picket line!

Diane indicated that the Principal had asked the women why they could not simply picket the contractor at his premises or set up at the local shopping centre - instead of in front of his school. The ladies indicated to him that why they were there was because that was where the contractor would try to do his job. They had to prevent him from carrying out the contract otherwise their cause would be lost.

Diane indicated that the Principal's attitude was not well accepted by the community. The community's attitude, she says, was "this is our community and we care about people's jobs. We care about these people being unemployed and we don't care about the front of your school being a bit dirty. What's important is these people's employment." (Interview - Diane Rowe)

The Teachers

Diane indicated that they stopped each teacher as they passed through the picket line and asked how they felt about the dispute. She said that with the exception of 1 or 2 they all supported what the cleaners were doing. They didn't believe the cleaners should be unemployed either.

Margaret recalls that her impression was that a lot of the teachers were not that supportive of their action. She said that their attitude only changed some months after the dispute when the teachers themselves were having hassles with the government over class sizes and other issues. They then realised what the cleaners had been through. It is perhaps significant that in the dispute about class sizes teachers from Safety Bay High led the revolt. One wonders if they were spurred on to that action by the successful experience of the cleaners some time earlier.

The Students

The students, despite the directive from the principal did become involved in the events. Diane recalls that at the time of the dispute the school was very much into conservation. With the advent of the picket line posters calling to 'Save the Whales' were covered over by the students with 'Save the Cleaners'. The students also commandeered 'for sale' signs and placed them in front of the school.

Diane indicated that 'when there was some sort of action going on at the picket line the students would pour out through the windows and to to support their mother, their aunty or Mrs so-and-so down the road' (Interview - Diane Rowe). Ultimately Diane says she was invited to the school by the teachers to talk to the students about industrial relations. During the dispute (and to the annoyance of some parents) the principal asked the students to clean toilets and empty rubbish as a means of getting around the problems the school was having. This move, however, backfired when the students put toilet rolls, jumpers etc. down the toilets blocking them. At one stage the students also turned off the water supply to the school causing the school to call in the Water Authority to reconnect supply.

Many of the students also wanted to sit on the picket line in support of the cleaners. The picketers and the union discouraged this, however, as they felt they had an obligation to their schooling. It was near the end of the year and some students were preparing for their Tertiary Entrance Examinations. Some Year 11 students, who had finished exams did join the picket line for a time. Students also gathered petitions and lobbied the local member and got him to come down to the picket.

Margaret, however, does not remember the students so fondly. Most vivid in her memory is the recollection of the intimidation the women suffered from students driving past and throwing flour and water bombs and doing burn-outs. She was also angered by the fact that the cleaners on the picket line were wrongly blamed by the media for acts committed by the students (such as turning off the water supply).

The Community

Diane points out that the community generally was very much supportive of the women's action. The Rockingham area had a fairly high level of unemployment and it is perhaps not unusual then that the community would be supportive of these women who had been retrenched even though they themselves had done nothing wrong. Diane said that there was also resentment to the fact that the contract had been given to an 'outsider', someone who had never had a business in the area, did not live in the area and who was going to rob the area of 15 jobs.

Other community involvement included:

- * neighbouring residents to the school offered food, drinks and the use of toilet facilities and showers to the women on the picket line.
- * the local Delicatessen would come down and take orders, make them up and return them to the picket line free of charge to save people having to leave the picket line to purchase food.
- * the Police came around consistently during the night to check that everyone was alright.

The Government Cleaners

After the picket line had been going for several days and there being no sign of a resolution, the union made a decision to involve other schools in the area. Some seventeen schools involving approximately 100 government employed cleaners were asked to come to a mass meeting at the picket line. They were told that the dispute was dragging on and that what these cleaners were fighting for was basically the right to employment. The meeting almost unanimously voted for a twenty-four-hour stoppage in support of the picketers.

Diane points out that this was the first occasion where government cleaners and contract cleaners had combined in an industrial action. She said that the Government cleaners were quite prepared to go out for longer but by the end of the twenty-four-hour stoppage the matter was in the hands of the Industrial Commission.

The escalation of the dispute to include the surrounding schools was I think a significant factor in putting pressure on the Ministry to find a resolution to the dispute.

The Ministry

The Ministry of Education for its part found itself embroiled in a dispute between its contractor and the cleaners, which it wanted no part of. From the Ministry's point of view it had gone through the tendering process properly and it was the right of the incoming contractor to choose his employees. The dispute it said was one between the contractor and the Miscellaneous Worker's Union.

As the dispute escalated, however, the Ministry increasingly found itself under pressure to come up with a solution. When the government cleaners went on strike the Ministry realised that if they didn't come up with a compromise the dispute would escalate and hundreds of schools would be out the next day.

The Ministry was in a difficult position, however, because if it didn't allow the contractor to perform the contract it could be sued for breach of contract. In the end, Diane says, they got out of it on a technicality relating to the contractor's failure to perform the contract over the one week period of the picket. It also appeared that there was an agreement to pay the contractor an unspecified amount to cover costs and a limited amount of compensation.

The Aftermath

Margaret Maley was one of the ten women who returned to her job at Safety Bay High School after the dispute. She says that it was horrible going back to the school after all that had happened. One of the sore points for her was the fact that the new contractor did not increase their hours, nor did he employ more girls. The ten who stayed at the school were and still are expected to do the work that was previously done by fifteen. At least she says they all have jobs.

What she got out of the dispute was a sense of self respect. She says she previously thought that she had no rights but now she realises she has. She says she did not want to do what she did, she would rather have been at home in her own bed and with her husband and kids. She felt they had to take the action they did, however, to show that they weren't 'mere women' and 'mere cleaners' as most seemed to think.

She also indicated that the events during the picket line had given the women a new vision of unions. A lot she says were not sure of unions. They thought they were strong and dictatorial. She says however they couldn't have done anything better or been more supportive.

In the end she says the ordeal served to bring all the women closer together. It proved to them that they were individuals and that they did have rights. They also most importantly experienced a victory.

Conclusion

The Safety Bay picket line was an unusual event in many ways. It was unusual in the sense that the fifteen women who maintained the picket line were not the type of people one expects to see at such an event. They were middle aged women, all of whom were part-time workers (up until they were retrenched) working between ten and twelve and a half hours per week. Most had husbands and children at home. They were of mixed origin, the majority being British migrants, the rest Australian.

For most this dispute became something of a role reversal. These women came from working class backgrounds where it was not unusual for the husband to be on strike or to be involved in industrial action. This time, however, it was the husband at home looking after the kids while the wife manned the picket line.

There appear to have been a number of factors which motivated these women to mount their twenty four hour a day vigil. Some quite honestly were desperate, their wage was their only source of income and the picket line appeared to be their only hope of retaining their jobs. The others whilst not completely dependant on the income from their jobs were still reliant on that income to a large degree to meet their commitments. It would also have been a very lean Christmas for all of them if they had not retained their jobs.

One thing which did motivate all of the women was the treatment they received by the incoming contractor. To be told after some six to nine years of employment that you might not have enough experience to do your own job was one thing but when these ladies saw their jobs advertised in the local paper, before they were even interviewed, they became determined that this contractor must

be stopped. They became adamant that they weren't going to let him on the premises to carry out the contract.

It is likely that when they mounted their twenty-four-hour picket line they did not anticipate being there for five days. As was pointed out, however, some had a lot a stake and all really had nothing to lose as they had already been retrenched. Also as time wore on the women found themselves being bonded closer together.

In the end they tasted the sweet taste of victory, some with secure government jobs in surrounding schools and the rest returning to their old jobs at the school (albeit under a different contractor). Most of the women I think would agree that their experience was both frightening and yet personally satisfying. What they felt they had demonstrated was that they were not 'mere women' or 'mere cleaners' but were individuals who were prepared to stand up for their rights as they saw it - the right to continued employment.

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Working on the Permanent Way

RAILWAY WORKERS IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA, 1905-1925

Joan Brenton-Coward

The word “navvy” was first used in England in 1760 when men were employed to dig canals, the word itself derived from the word Navigationers. At first navvies were skilled earth removers digging canals at great speed. Later they became experts in tunnelling and mining and were employed as excavators on railway construction gangs. Many were local agricultural labourers. The British historian D. Sullivan describes Navvies as

‘...sub-working class. Sub - the bottommost heap of English working society... they lived like aliens in their own country, often outside its national sense of community... their own countrymen were terrified of them.’¹

and another historian, David Brooke, maintains they were a violent people, brutal and heavy drinkers. He states

‘His nationality was more often than not Irish and whilst the prodigious strength of the navvy inspired respect, he was more remembered for intemperance and belligerence.’²

They drifted from one construction site to the next so that social isolation was an important feature of their work situation. One is left with an image of a rough, belligerent, intemperate, unskilled working man. But Sullivan notes

‘...what they said about navvies was often true yet it was often exaggerated and sometimes undeserved.’³

D. Rowe argues that the Australian navvies, at least those working in New South Wales in the 1880s, were conservative men who aspired to Victorian values of property and religion.⁴ This conclusion is more in keeping with another Englishman Paul Thompson’s portrait of semi-skilled railway employees as respectable working class men whose working lives centre around the Chapel and the Railway at the Junction.⁵

The maintenance men in Western Australia who worked on the Permanent Way were not the legendary navvies. They were known as Repairers and Gangers and they maintained an allocated length of railway line. The word Fettler is sometimes used to describe a Repairer but the term Ganger referred only to the Supervisor, although titles did vary from state to state. Repairers were known as such only in Western Australia and Victoria. They were known officially as Fettleers in Tasmania, New South Wales and Queensland, and Packers in South Australia and the Northern Territory. Labourers were employed by the Western Australian Government Railways, too, but they were not part of the Permanent Way maintenance team. There were also common nicknames; Snake Charmers in Western Australia, Hairy Legs in

New South Wales and Woolly Noses in South Australia.⁶ This article will explore the world of the workers on the Permanent Way; who they were, their work, their bosses and their unions.

* * * * *

Railway construction began in Western Australia in 1879 but the first government line was laid between Geraldton and Northampton and it was soon followed by a suburban line in 1881 between Perth and Fremantle. Extensions were made to this line in the next seven years, reaching out to Chidlow's Wells, York, Northam, Newcastle (Toodyay) and Beverley. To keep pace with closer settlement in the South a line was opened between Perth and Picton and by 1897 the Kalgoorlie goldfields were connected to the capital by rail. Two major private lines were opened between Geraldton and Perth, and between Beverley and Albany, under a land grant concession scheme. An impetus for further development in Western Australia came in 1905 when the Moore government's Royal Commission on Immigration recommended railway lines be built within a fifteen mile radius of new farming properties. It was the belief of the Commission that the railway system was the most pivotal factor in opening up new wheatlands and hence providing employment to diggers who had lost their jobs on the declining goldfields.⁷ The outcome of this programme was that the area of wheatland trebled between 1911-1916. To achieve this growth the Government planned for the most economical railway network possible which meant light and cheaply constructed railways and spur lines. Sleepers were sometimes cut from trees along the track and laid without ballast.⁸ The objective was the provision of low cost railways which nevertheless served a maximum land area. This was to have both short and long term repercussions for Permanent Way maintenance costs and reconstruction expenditure. It was a dilemma for Railway administrators. Was the objective to produce a revenue surplus aimed at reducing the public debt, or was it to provide an indirect means of subsidising primary industry? The latter position was the accepted one but it was not well understood by the Commissioner of Railways⁹ whose budgeting constraints affected not only the quality of the service but the working conditions of the employees.

From the inception of the colony's railway system until responsible government in 1890, its management was in the hands of a Commissioner of Railways. He was also responsible for the private company lines. With responsible government, the position was converted into a ministerial one and active management was given to a General Manager. Construction of new lines was carried out by the Department for Public Works.

This separation of construction from maintenance caused differences of opinion between the Commissioner of Railways and those responsible for construction, but the Railway Act of 1904 placed railway administration with a Commissioner now only a public servant, thus removing railway operations were removed from the political arena.¹⁰

For organizational purposes the service was divided into Administration, Traffic, Locomotive and Ways and Works. In 1905 there were five major regions; Eastern, South-Western, Great Southern, Eastern Goldfields and Northern. The Ways and Works Branch was under the control of an Engineer for Existing Lines who was responsible for the efficient maintenance of railways, railway bridges, buildings and construction of existing lines. Signalling systems were also under his control.

Responsibility for the Permanent Way rested with the District Engineer, Permanent Way Inspector and Gangers. A District Engineer was expected to cover his district four times a year, whereas a District Inspector was required to travel throughout the area on a weekly basis, ensuring that Gangers were keeping the track in good order and that gangs were supplied with the tools to do the work adequately. Gangers made a daily inspection, save in the most isolated areas where there was not a frequent service. From 1915 Length Runners under the supervision of the Ganger were employed to carry out this duty. In 1903 it was a requirement that Gangers travelled on their trolleys or tricycles at a speed of four miles per hour, to ascertain that the line was in working order for the following twenty four hours.

A Ganger's task was not only to look for defects but to supervise his team of Repairers in carrying out the tasks assigned to them. The following is a list of their duties.¹¹

1. The regular inspection of the line to tighten all loose fastenings, looking for broken rails and fishplates.
2. Examination of the level and gauge of the track and the state of the joints.
3. Marking and if necessary, repairing defective panels, crossings and Scotch Blocks.
4. Keeping the working parts of the points and signals oiled and cleaned.
5. At Level Crossings, ballast stones and rubbish should be kept clear so that an accumulation does not interfere with the running of the train.
6. Grass, boughs and rubbish were to be kept clear of the Telegraph and Signal wires, Point Rods and rails.
7. Ensure that all Railway Gates are closed.
8. Burning off scrub on railway property and extinguishing accidental fires. In summer there were special precautions to be taken.
9. In winter months drains had to be clear and cuttings firm to avoid minor and major landslides.
10. In flood times, to be available or on duty for as long as a flood might endanger a passing train, reporting on the height of the flood, damage to culverts and bridges.

11. Fencing was to be kept in good order and stock removed from railway property when straying through broken fences.

The most important tool of the Repairer's trade was the trolley upon which the gang travelled to work. Initially it was propelled by hand, but in the 1920's the motorized trolley was utilized eliminating much of the former arduous travel. The trolley had many non-official uses too, from the use of the vehicle for Sunday outings and the collection of firewood to its use as an ambulance in medical emergencies.

The most dangerous work appeared to be carried out by shunters in coupling and uncoupling trucks and carriages. In this period there were seven Permanent Way deaths and fourteen cases of trolley accidents. These resulted from trains overtaking men on trolleys. In two cases men were run over by trains in the station as they carried out their duties, one Repairer had a heart attack whilst on his trolley and another committed suicide at a lonely outpost.

Working conditions were often unpleasant. In winter months men might be exposed to bad weather, working waist deep in water at washaways without food for long periods. In summer they were obliged to patrol lengths of track in temperatures up to 112°, suffering from prickly heat without shade.¹² They worked in dust storms, shovelling sand a foot deep from the line. They often travelled home in the dark forty miles on a hand-propelled trolley, hampered by wintry conditions.¹³ Patsy Adam-Smith writes from personal recollections of the consequences -

The scarred hands, the shoulders slightly bent from carrying too great a weight for too long, the neck leathered and burnt from exposure to the sun.¹⁴

* * * * *

Most conditions of employment on the railways were based upon secure employment on the one hand and a disciplined system of work on the other. Rigorously imposed time and work disciplines (almost like nineteenth century army discipline) were in keeping not only with "the zealous husbandry of time"¹⁵, but also stemmed from the needs of the work itself, namely the close attention to detail, vigilance, punctuality, obedience and literary skills. The requirements for a position on the Permanent Way reflected this, namely the safe and proper use of railway equipment, vigilance and high standards of work and work co-operation. There were detailed regulations set down as guidelines, incentives to encourage satisfactory performance from employees and sanctions for failure to meet work standards. Reminders appeared regularly in the Weekly Notices concerning safety issues such as the proper use of trolleys, the requirements of Permanent Way men in emergencies and instructions about seasonal dangers such as winter flooding and bushfires. Gangers were expected to own a timepiece, carry a copy of the Regulations, and possess an up-to-date timetable of passenger and freight trains.

They were also expected to have a copy of the current Weekly Notices which gave notice of additional special trains. It was also necessary for Gangers and Repairers to be available for after hours emergency work and Repairer's whereabouts had to be known at all times by the Ganger and their addresses recorded by the Inspector.

Work incentives were offered to Permanent Way workers in the form of rewards, bonuses, transfers and promotion. Free monthly rail passes for shopping and half second-class fares were offered to permanent staff. There was also an allowance for staff employed on the Goldfields. Free water up to 15 gallons per day was provided for married men and 5 gallons per day for single men.¹⁶ The Annual Best Kept Length bonus system in each district is of interest. Gangers received a monetary prize and Repairers shared one for first, second, third, fourth and fifth place.¹⁷

Promotion depended upon merit and work experience and successful employees were appointed for higher duties after as short a period as two years. Others, nevertheless, waited for many years. Repairers interested in promotion were invited to apply and were considered in order of application. Failure to meet acceptable levels of work performance resulted in reprimands, cautions, fines, suspensions, demotions and dismissals. The Commissioners' Annual Reports suggest that discipline was an ongoing practice but was not overly rigorous.

The following list of misdemeanours appeared in the Record of Service Books for the period 1901-1911 with the punishments incurred.¹⁸

A. Working Relationships

- | | |
|----------------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| 1. Altercation with Ganger | Caution |
| 2. Assaulting Ganger | Caution |
| 3. Not working amicably | Caution |
| 4. Refusing to obey Ganger's instruction | Suspension and 3 weeks without pay |
| 5. Half hour late and unsatisfactory conduct | Caution |

B. Railway Property

- | | |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. Use of trolley for non-work purposes | Caution |
| 2. Damage to trolley by Goods Train | Caution |
| 3. Collecting firewood on Trolley during working hours | Caution |
| 4. Removing Trolley after working hours to travel to hostel and being drunk | Suspension/
Dismissal |
| 5. Ganger allowed Repairer use of Trolley for private business | 20/- fine |
| 6. Allowing Trolley to be run down by Special train | Caution |
| 7. Leaving Trolley unattended | Caution |
| 8. Breaking open Tool House and removing Trolley for private use | Dismissed |
| 9. Pawning Government Tools | Dismissed |

C. Alcohol related

- | | |
|---------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|
| 1. Absent without leave and intoxicated. | Caution |
| 2. Under the influence of alcohol and abusive to Ganger | Caution |
| 3. Ganger permitting alcohol at work | Reduced and transferred |
| 4. Abusive language | Transferred |

The major concern of management was the provision of an efficient service at the lowest possible labour cost. This meant paying workers with expertise adequate wages and at the same time terminating and retrenching other workers wherever possible. On the Permanent Way new technology made this possible. The introduction of motor cycles for maintenance extended each gang's length and reduced overall the number of maintenance men employed. The motor quadracycle was introduced in 1924 and again reduced the number of Repairers from 819 to 752.

High maintenance costs in keeping a sub-standard railway line in order at the turn of the century was again a difficulty at the end of World War I when wartime economies caused the neglect of maintenance. The Commissioner was faced with the problem of salary cuts instituted by Parliament and an increased work load. Management used several ploys to reduce staff numbers, for example employing temporary and casual staff, retrenching on the basis of age, health and completion of project, and tighter disciplinary measures.

One important welfare issue for all Railway employees was the management run Employees Death Benefit Voluntary Fund. The object of the Railway Commissioner was to do away with the necessity for the numerous subscriptions circulated by the Union asking for assistance for widows and orphans. A permanent employee could belong to the fund and that a Ganger was on the inaugural committee.²⁰

It is possible to paint a portrait of the typical maintenance man on the Permanent Way of the W.A.G.R. In the early years of the twentieth century he joined the Service when he was about twenty nine years of age after a transient work history. Possibly he did not stay long and left without giving notice. Perhaps he had saved the fare to move to the city or back to the Eastern States or he may have been one of the 30% who stayed for at least five years. As a Repairer he would have had frequent moves, if not from his district at least to neighbouring gangs. The chances of him being a recent arrival from the United Kingdom were 20% and if he came from another State he may have had previous railway experience.²¹ Towards the end of the period under discussion at least one member of his gang would have been a recent arrival from England. He may have only just got married or was hoping to find a wife soon - there were few young women about the country towns where he lived. If he did marry his family was likely to have been a large one.

In 1905 he would have earned 8/- per day for a 96 hour fortnight. By 1925 he would have earned Four Pounds Three Shillings and Fourpence for a 44 hour week. To earn more by aspiring to the position of Ganger he would have to have been better educated than most or display some outstanding initiative, otherwise it would be several years before he was selected.²²

If the worker lived in a largish country town there would have been opportunities for him to join with other Railwaymen in sporting organizations. He might have belonged to one or two men's groups. But most likely his contacts would have been limited to his own work group because he would have been isolated in his town by his railway house or barracks and his labouring status. Amongst his mates he would have talked 'shop', boasted about his section and recalled the names of men who had come and gone in the Service. He may have taken a pride in his make-shift dwelling with its vegetable garden and fowl run.

Why did a stayer make a career out of this arduous and repetitive work? His earnings were barely sufficient to keep a family and his frequent moves must have made him feel like gypsy. And he was away in camp for most of the week. There were constant irritations with the 'bosses' over working conditions too.

He may have been proud to affirm that he had worked his way up to the position of Ganger after years as a Repairer, Leading Repairer and Length Runner. He might have said that it was the only job he knew that had some security for a hard-working man, a house of sorts with low rent and travelling concessions, and country air was that good for his children. He could boast about a good Union and privately describe the unofficial benefits of country life such as fresh rabbits, goats meat, firewood and barter with new settlers or townsfolk.

He went to social gatherings such as the Annual Railway Picnic for which there were regional Railway holidays. These gatherings allowed isolated groups to come together for a day's friendly rivalry in sporting events, entertainment for the children and storytelling for the more seasoned employees.

He would have had some difficulty in talking about his proprietary feelings and the sense of belonging he felt to the Service which, through the Weekly Notices, provided him with 'secret knowledge'. It was a lonely existence if he was unmarried. To colleagues he would share the good and the bad experiences, - the special Bonus or the fatal accident to one of his workmates. He would draw on his specialized knowledge using special Permanent Way jargon and this might mitigate his relative social isolation. The location of railway housing alongside or close to railway lines isolated families from the main population, separating them from other working class people, as well as other classes. Railway housing was associated

with noise, smoke and dirt. The proximity of houses to each other produced close bonds between them but frictions, too, with day to day disagreements.

Overall then, isolated housing stereotyped the Permanent Way workers as 'railway people'. The British historian, F. McKenna, asserts that Railway housing estates in Britain set a seal of respectability for the employees.²³ It is doubtful that railway housing in Western Australia provided respectability to its inhabitants in small country centres.

Then there is the question of whether work relationships carried over into the non-work environment. Between Ganger and Repairers there was a hierarchy of status yet the social isolation within a township may have overcome this.

On the other hand railway people may have had good feelings about being part of a large organization with Benefit Societies and 'fringe benefits', reasonable job security and the knowledge that their work was important to the organization. In larger towns individual families may have found acceptance in Church and Masonic groups and the local school. They too had sons and relatives in the Armed Forces and shared a common bond with a wide cross section of the community.²⁴

* * * * *

In the late nineteenth century there was a great expansion of Unionism amongst unskilled and semi-skilled workers. This thrust, termed the 'new unionism', saw all-grades railway unions formed alongside separately organized engine-drivers and craft unions of workers like engineers in railway workshops. In Western Australia industrial militancy was not a strong characteristic in these developmental years, but because the State became such a large employer of railway labour it inadvertently contributed to the growth of unionism.

The beginning of the period under discussion, marks the end of what may be termed the formative years of unionism in Western Australia.²⁵ By the late nineties Trade Unions were organized on the Goldfields and on the coast. Parliament legalized them and established a Conciliation and Arbitration Court, and with the influx of migrants from the eastern colonies and overseas, industrial issues were vitalized.

The first recorded meeting of railway employees, who met with a view to forming a union, was held in the Rechabites Hall in Parry Street, Fremantle on March 21st, 1899 and some 64 employees were present. The meeting had the support of the Railway Drivers and Firemen's Association and the Trades and Labour Council. A union was established and the first conference of delegates met in August 1899 and the following year there was a move to affiliate with railway groups in the Eastern Colonies.²⁶ However it was September 1901 before

Parliament acceded to the organization's request for recognition.²⁷ From its earliest meetings the union made decisions to take up issues with the Commissioner of Railways on behalf of general labourers, porters, goodsmen, shunters, porters and permanent way men. The particular interests of the maintenance men included accommodation, promotions, wages, classification systems, overtime and suspensions.

The first elected office bearers of the West Australian Railway Association (later designated the West Australian Amalgamated Society of Railway Employees) drew up a Constitution and began to organise a statewide membership. A Resolution at a Special Meeting on October 10, 1900 read -

That this Association is open to all employees of the West Australian Government Railways who have been duly moved and seconded and balloted for by a General Meeting of members....reserves the right of rejecting any candidate whose identification with the Association may deem inimicable to the best interests of the Association or its relationship with the Department.²⁸

During the first twelve months country branches were formed at Albany, Collie, Northam, Geraldton, the Goldfields and Midland. The following table illustrates the growth and response to a Union inaugurated to represent all grades and unskilled Railway employees.²⁹

Year	Total Railway Workforce	Permanent Way Workforce	Association Membership	% of Total Workforce
1905	6748	2110	2261	33.5
1906	6408	1856	2155	33.6
1907	5816	1580	1757	30.2
1908	5607	1591	1685	30.05
1909	5675	1564	1783	31.41
1910	5926	1607	2218	37.41
1911	6951	1984	3442	49.51
1912	7562	2297	3630	48.00
1913	7750	2215	3613	46.61
1914	7993	2344	3492	43.68
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1921	8083	2089	3791	46.90
1922	7505	2124	3550	47.30
1923	7439	1970	3453	46.41
1924	7734	2126	3798	49.10
1925	7616	1800	4183	54.92
1926	8015	1797	4236	52.85

The General Committee made regular trips to Branches to discuss local grievances and pass on Union information. Sub-committees were formed to deal with specialized areas of work.³⁰ The Political Committee and a Grievance Committee, for instance, met frequently. The Union

wrote regularly to the Eastern States all-grades unions and even those in New Zealand. For instance, in 1903 the Executive wrote to the Victorian Railway Employees, -

‘The members of this Union have every sympathy with the Victorian Railways Employees in their struggle with the Victorian Railway Department and pledge themselves to assist financially to the fullest extent. They consider the unwarrantable attack by the Irvine Government on the most sacred rights as citizens of the Victorian Railway servants calls for united action by Railway employees throughout Australia.’³¹

The Union did not show the same fervour for the General Railway Strike in New South Wales in 1917 but its support was more practical. It was noted in the Union’s Minutes for August 28, 1917 -

‘...a circular appealing for assistance for wives and families - read and noted.’

and on September 4th -

‘...moved that 250 Pounds be forwarded as a loan’³²

For the most part working conditions during these years were negotiated with the Commissioner of Railways. The Union operated in an industrial climate in which issues like the employers’ ‘capacity to pay’ and the theory of the Living Wage were the fundamentals of wage fixation. The Commissioner wrote in his Annual Report, 1908 -

the result may be summarized by stating that the expenditure of the Department is now practically on a bed-rock basis and there will remain but little scope for further reduction while the careful regard for the safety of passengers and property and efficiency of maintenance and train service continue at the present high standard.

It is important to note the concessions gained by the Union prior to 1905 for Repairers and Gangers. A Strike in 1901 was over the issue of wages for Gangers and Repairers and began after months of negotiation with the Commissioner of Railways. Whilst a demand to increase Ganger’s wages from 8/- to 9/- per day was successful, there was an impasse over the question of a 6d. increase for Repairers. The Union wanted to increase their wage from 7/- to 7/6 a day. As the Union was not at that time registered under the Conciliation and Arbitration Act the matter was eventually decided by the Mayors of Perth and Fremantle.³³ The Repairers received the increase.

In a settlement by the Arbitration Court on December 31, 1905, wages for Repairers and Gangers were reduced on the grounds that the Railways were no longer able to pay the former wage. The President of the Court, Judge S.H. Parker stated -

‘the rates of railway freights could only be reasonable if wages were moderate’³⁴

Thus the gains made in the Strike of 1901 were lost. Gangers' wages reverted to 8/- from 9/- and Repairers to 7/- from 7/6.

Apart from minor amendments there were only two other occasions when the Union applied to the Arbitration Court for a new Award which referred to Gangers and Repairers. Most settlements were made by way of Agreements between the Union and the Commissioner of Railways. During the wartime years the Commissioner opted to defer submissions and requested an extension of time on the 1912 Agreement. This was accepted and the Government granted all married men a 1/- per day increase. At the same time the Union had claims pending with the Arbitration Court. There was a further Court settlement in 1922. The Union was reminded at the 1917 hearing -

‘it is necessary at the present time to have regard to the effect of the War upon our State and its industries when dealing with wage rates. It is impossible to maintain the precise standard adopted in our pre-war prosperity.’³⁶

In the Award of 1922 working hours were reduced from 48 to 44 but wages were also reduced. However overtime and travelling allowances were made more generous.

The provision of better accommodation for staff was another important issue raised by the Union. Throughout the period this was constantly brought to the attention of the Commissioner. As early as 1904 the Union requested larger living units and better fencing.³⁷ It was not only family accommodation that was limited. Flying Gangs billeted away from home lived in sub-standard conditions.³⁸ For instance at Menzies a two-roomed cottage with kitchen was provided for a Ganger and his ten men. Camps varied from fully equipped outfits complete with Cook, to the provision of the most basic shelter. In the post-war years senior officers from within the Department also made a plea for improvements. Often Railway personnel of all levels lived in tents, sheds and humpies.³⁹ The first honest description of Railway housing is not recorded by an authority until 1948 when a Royal Commission looking into the operations of the Railway Department recorded a desperate housing problem.⁴⁰

The rapid growth of union membership was doubtless due to the adoption of compulsory arbitration by Commonwealth and State legislatures. When the 1901 Permanent Way Strike was in progress, only 93 signatures were secured out of some 900 Permanent Way employees, for presentation of a Petition to the Commissioner of Railways.⁴¹ And in 1906 the Editor of Railway News wrote to a subscriber, -

‘there appears to be a need for a good all round shake-up ... the need for consistent organizing is more apparent than ever ... the fact remains that greater cohesion is really needed when things are not going so well...’⁴²

And again in 1907 the Secretary of the General Committee wrote to the Branch Secretary at Chidlows -

‘get the men organized in the Permanent Way on the Newcastle line.’⁴³

Nevertheless, Permanent Way men were active. For example, two Gangers were representatives at the Annual Conference of the Union in 1906.⁴⁴ Country branches wrote regularly to the General Committee for guidance on issues relating to Gangers and Repairers. According to an informant however, men were discouraged from active participation for fear of dismissal.⁴⁵

* * * * *

The Western Australian Repairers and Gangers do not fit the Navy stereotypes, nor the characters of Paul Thompson’s English unskilled and semi-skilled railway worker. There were several determinants which give them an identity of their own. The opportunity for permanence and job security on the one hand and the work environment of physically isolated locations with sparse populations on the other, shape their characters. The long term employees were likely to have had some independence of mind, and few social constraints but an identification with and loyalty for the organization that employed them. They were quick to unionise and became good unionists but this was in a political and industrial context which was not conducive to good relations between employers and employees. All these factors when combined made workers on the Permanent Way a unique group in the history of Western Australia’s labouring men.

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EUREKA CELEBRATED IN WEST AUSTRALIA

Over a hundred people celebrated Eureka on December 3rd at the Miscellaneous Workers' Union rooms at Subiaco. The meeting received greetings from Ballarat Commemorative Committee representative Brian Tobin and from Peter Proctor, from the Eureka Celebration at Manjimup in the South West of WA.

The Perth celebration was organised by the Society for the Study of Labor History WA Branch and compered by the President of the Society, Arbitration Commissioner Tony Beech.

MWU Secretary Jim McGinty, speaking on "Eureka and Today's Unionists", outlined the difficulties facing unionists today. He warned that the penal sanctions and Court decisions, as used against the air pilots, could set a dangerous precedent and intimidate unions from direct and indirect action. The Union movement needed the ability to fight, to see the necessity for change and reform, for freedom of assembly and the right to strike.

John Picton-Warlow, who wrote the libretto of the opera "Eureka" with Carlo Stransky, spoke first of the creation of the opera. It was based on the book by Raffaello Carboni, with the music written by Roberto Hazon, outstanding Italian composer, maestro of La Scala.

He then spoke of the Eureka actions as part of a world-wide series of revolutions and struggles around basic human rights. The French Revolution was a complete takeover by the people, the violent overthrow of autocracy, but absorbed into the imperialist dynasty. Europe developed a deep-seated fear of revolution with an increase of barbaric violence against any revolt of the peoples - as in the bloody suppression of the Chartist movement and the European revolutions of 1848.

Many who had been involved in struggle had come to Victoria to find gold and freedom. There was a government in Victoria with some elements of democracy, elected on a property vote. Miners demanded that the miner's right was tantamount to owning land and that they should have a vote. The fight at the Stockade, as part of the wideranging protests, won the right of miners to vote and established traditions of democracy. The miners who were tried for high treason, although guilty in law, were acquitted - for no jury could be found to convict them.

John Picton-Warlow urged the meeting never to forsake the jury system, where the accused would be judged by their peers.

Joan Williams told how women made the flag. At great risk, the women at Eureka had hidden and tended the wounded who had a high price on their heads. Though confined to this traditional role, they would have been aware of the demands that were being fought for, including the vote for their menfolk - the struggle for their own vote developed later. Eureka

veteran Monty Miller assisted this with his enlightened attitude to the exploitation of women. It was not until the Paris Commune, seventeen years after Eureka, that women participated in a revolutionary struggle on a basis of equality with their own demands for education, child care and legal rights put into practice until the overthrow of the Commune. Women had fought alongside the men on the barricades and had representatives on the leading committees.

Joan concluded by reading from Mary Gilmore's poem, "The men of Eureka":

*And the men who had been at Eureka
Made me a flag of stars, and gave me
A name, and the name they gave was EUREKA;
"For the child," they said, "is one of our kin."
Digger by Digger they marched,
Each numbered in order,
Who digger by digger are gone,
Over the border.*

The speeches were interspersed with lively renditions of folk and work songs. John Joseph Jones, unaccompanied sang the first bracket and Jean Allen and Ian Conochie sang the second while Jack Allen accompanied them on guitar. Brenda Conochie sang a bracket of four songs, some of her own composition, and Ian Gallagher wound up the meeting with his own selection.

The organisers of the celebration had set out to make contact with the descendants of the survivors of Eureka. First, by working from the names of the fifteen survivors who rode in the place of honour at the head of 4,000 who took part in a Perth demonstration in December, 1904. We had early made contact with the descendants of Monty Miller from his two daughters and had sighted his walking stick and brace and bit (still working) and his writing box. Henry de Longville, who fired the first warning shot at Eureka, settled in WA after considerable world travel. He worked as a boat builder in North Fremantle and his rusted hand-made tools are with the de Longville families. The de Longvilles in WA and South Australia are all his descendants.

William Atherden, as a fourteen-year-old, jumped ship at Melbourne to go for gold and was at Eureka. He came to WA in the gold rush, went back to England, and returned to farm at York, WA. He died in 1934, and was buried at Karrakatta Cemetery, the last known survivor. Recently there was a gathering of two hundred of his descendants.

A notice in the "West Australian" asking for information from descendants brought a good response. Henry Hannington, mentioned in W.B. Withers' "History of Ballarat" and possibly other accounts of the rebellion, has at least one descendant in WA. He was buried at Ballarat. Michael Hanrahan was a lieutenant of Lalor, who sent him out with a small party to investigate

a rumour of troop movements, and was not in the stockade. Mrs Nita Pannell, long an outstanding actress in WA theatre, is one of his descendants.

Other names that surfaced with descendants here were Patrick Lehey, Carl Amamodus Struck and Michael O'Dea. Another one was Prisk. James Corbett came to Australia in 1842, went to Ballarat for gold and was in the Stockade. He found a bullet in his bag of flour. Tom Fry, also in the Stockade, took a door with bullet holes for his hut - to remind him of the shooting. Samuel Green was one of those killed on the day; a descendant of a close relative of his - possibly his sister who was there - is in WA.

Two soldiers of the 12th Foot, Joseph Cross and Edward McComish, have descendants in WA. They met at the recent celebration. There is also a descendant in WA of Trooper John King who cut down the Eureka flag.

James Ryan, who took the message of the wound of Lalor to Lalor's fiancée in Geelong, has descendants in WA. Richard Williams (or Ivor Gwynne in Welsh) had a citation from Peter Lalor, according to one of his descendants. A William Henry Perry, or Parry, is reported to have died a fortnight after the fighting. He could have been a victim.

John Perrie, born in Glasgow in 1840, came out with his father and uncle when he was eleven. They found good gold at Castlemaine and were ready to go back to Scotland, but couldn't get a ship. They went to Ballarat. It is not known if the men were involved in the Stockade, but the boy John worked the bellows for a blacksmith making pikes. The newspaper report says "for the soldiers" but the soldiers would not have used pikes, but the diggers did. Monty Miller mentions two blacksmiths, Gittens and McNab, as making pikes for the diggers and John Perrie could have been working for one of these. Gittens was one of those reported killed. John Perrie was renowned as an oarsman. He lived until he was nearly one hundred, and died in WA in the late 1930's.

A descendant reported that three brothers, Okke, Henrich and Arfts Harken from Isle of Fohr off Denmark, arrived in Australia in 1854 and were thought to have been at Eureka.

The success of the celebration, both of the meeting and the contact and information from the descendants, will encourage the organisers to see that Eureka is celebrated in WA on December 3rd, 1990.

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BOOK REVIEW

Michael Hess, From Fragmentation to Unity: A History of the Western Australian Branch of the Federated Miscellaneous Workers Union. Perth, Miscellaneous Workers' Union, 1989.

“From Fragmentation to Unity” is a history of the Western Australian Branch of the Federated Miscellaneous Workers' Union. Dr Michael Hess tells the reader in his foreword that his motivation for this work was a number of questions he had from observing the nature and functioning of the labour movement in Western Australia in the context of his knowledge of the New South Wales scene. He concluded that a valuable means towards answering those questions could be through examining a particular union. He chose the W.A. Branch of the F.M.W.U. and set out, as he puts it, “to capture the character” of it through “describing the events of its development from its formation in the mid-1950's to its emergence as the State's largest union following a series of amalgamations in the early 1980's”.

There is no doubt the F.M.W.U. is one of the more interesting phenomena of modern Australian unionism. With a national membership of over 120,000 it is one of the largest unions in the country. But there are factors other than size which make this union particularly significant. One is the diversity of its membership. It encompasses, for instance, child care workers, cleaners, enrolled nurses, gardeners, zoo keepers, security agents, chemical workers and dairy workers. Another is the manner in which it has developed and particularly since the 1950's under the strong national leadership of Ray Gietzelt. Still another is the recent expansion of its coverage and activity in the government and government funded services sector as its traditional coverage in various blue collar manufacturing areas is eroded by changes in the structure of the Australian economy.

What Dr Hess has done with “From Fragmentation to Unity” is to illuminate a part of that whole.

The book is structured chronologically with each chapter, other than the final retrospective commentary, focussing on what the author sees as the principal characteristic of eras. The first chapter deals with the establishment of the Branch in 1955. The succeeding three chapters effectively concentrate on the struggle to survive and consolidate in areas of the workforce which were diverse, usually industrially weak and very difficult to organise and maintain. It is in these chapters that the sheer foot-slogging work of the organiser is painted into the story along with the job's inherent difficulties and the stress involved in constantly trying to sign up apathetic workers, collect membership fees, deal with hostile employers and maintain personal health in the face of long hours and sometimes demanding membership. The chapters dealing with the periods 1978-80 and 1980-82 tell a story of the changes, and especially the amalgamations, which saw the emergence of the modern F.M.W.U. in this State.

It is clear that Dr Hess's book has been shaped by his principal sources. These are the records of the Branch itself and of the amalgamating unions. They are obviously very rich sources and Dr Hess has mined intensely.

There are advantages. One is an ability thereby to focus on the individuals who constitute the whole. Thus "From Fragmentation to Unity" contains interesting cameos of various people and roles. These include, for instance, the Branch's long time secretary and de facto office organiser Margaret Rear; the evolving of Stan Hardie from the ranks of shop steward to President and full-time official; and Judy Trigwell's work on "the tea and sugar train" across the Nullabor and the impact of such community based work on her commitment to unionism. There are many more.

Of course there is a danger inherent in relying on the records of any organisation. The historian must guard against that almost universal tendency of compilers of minutes to paint the acceptable (numbers) picture. Thus, a step forward (or simply not backwards) may be translated into a great triumph and a failure to achieve an objective can be translated into a condemnation of those ubiquitous malignant external forces thwarting justice for the downtrodden. The historian must take care that such self-serving "analysis" is not reiterated at face value.

Dr Hess counterbalances by drawing widely on interviews conducted with various participants in the story of the Branch. The result is a strength of the book. Some very frank views have found their way into "From Fragmentation to Unity" and, in an important way, these give fundamental clues to the nature and functioning of the Branch over time. Clive Brown's critical assessment of his own role as Branch Secretary points up the difficulties encountered administratively and organisationally and in just sheer human endeavour by not only himself but others, and especially the ever valiant Don Lippiatt whose death at 49 in 1976 must surely be sourced in part at least to the pressures of some 20 years in harness to one of the toughest of employers - a union. Bill Latter's observations on various events are thoughtful and informative and go some way towards setting the position of the Branch more firmly in the wider community and in the political and industrial scene of the day. And Owen Salmon's reflective comments point to the key to the major change in the Branch's fortunes centred in the developments in the years 1979-82 and the importance of developing conceptual frameworks for the launching of industrial action.

This period, 1979-82, was dominated by major amalgamations. The planning, the set backs, the progress and the achievements of the amalgamations are all set down here. It is fascinating stuff; and particularly as these developments effectively constituted a platform in the early 1980's from which considerable power could be exercised by the Branch not only industrially but also within the Australian Labor Party. That is not all. There is the background story of

one of the amalgamating unions, the Hospital Employees Union. Dr Hess titles the chapter in which he describes the H.E.U. in the period leading to the amalgamations "New Directions". It is an important chapter because it demonstrates the development and application of a successful "modus operandi" by a union which covered semi-skilled and unskilled workers such that in significant respects it became the pace-setting union in Western Australia. The methods involved a focus on specific issues, strategic planning, a willingness to initiate industrial action where practical and an emphasis on competent, strong presentation of cases in arbitration tribunals. There is no doubt that Salmon was the catalyst within the H.E.U. but that whole experience can be seen to have been extended by Jim McGinty and Jeanette O'Keefe who took their talents and experience from the H.E.U. to the F.M.W.U. and to the Cleaners and Caretakers Union respectively - both of which, with the H.E.U. and the Pre-School Teachers' and Associates' Union and the Water Supply Union, subsequently amalgamated.

"From Fragmentation to Unity" is an important contribution to labour history in this State. It opens up a major trade union to scrutiny and it deserves to be read thoughtfully. One hundred years ago the 1890's depression in Australia and its effects was the impetus for enduring changes in direction by trade unions in the 20th century. There are many signs that the 1990's will be similarly demanding of unions. The ability of workers' associations to realistically meet challenges and to shape directions is crucial not only for Australia's well being but for the survival of unions. A proper understanding of the past may well be an imperative to the proper development of a viable relevant future. "From Fragmentation to Unity" is a significant aid to that end.

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