

Illawarra Unity - Journal of the Illawarra Branch of the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History

Volume 4
Issue 1 *Illawarra Unity*

Article 5

June 2004

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Recommended Citation

Quinn, Steve, Reminiscences of the Kemira Sit-In, *Illawarra Unity - Journal of the Illawarra Branch of the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History*, 4(1), 2004, 79-84.

Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/unity/vol4/iss1/5>

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Reminiscences of the Kemira Sit-In

Abstract

During 1982, coal miners at the Kemira Colliery staged a sit-in in defence of their jobs. Steve Quinn reminiscences record his role as organiser with the Australian Metal Workers Union.

Keywords

coal mines, strikes, New South Wales

Reminiscences of the Kemira Sit-In

Steve Quinn

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On 1 October, 1982 AIS gave notice of its intentions to sack 384 Coalminers. On the same day the Company announced in the Industrial Commission it was preparing to sack 3,200 Steelworkers offering as its reason ‘the urgency to do so was because of the pending recession unfolding in the Steel Industry’. Such stark declarations heralded the dark days that lay ahead causing us all to question and wonder WHY?

Why was it necessary to suddenly sack Coalminers and Steelworkers and thereby kill off our dream of being ‘the lucky country’.

That title was given to us in the 1960s when we proclaimed to the world that we had a magnificent future. The roaring 60s ensured continued high employment, no thought of retrenchment anywhere. Industrial Awards made no provisions for worthwhile payouts on retrenchments. We were happy enjoying our annual leave which attracted extra loading when taken. Our Long Service Leave was assured. Saturdays and Sundays were our leisure days. Playing bowls down the club, going fishing with the young’uns —it was great.

Better things were to come as we entered the 70s. That was the dawn of the great resource boom. Our GOLDEN future lay straight ahead. All industries were to flourish producing the equipment and machinery needed to extract Iron Ore, Coal, Bauxite, Oil and Gas. Rex Connor [Minister for Minerals and Energy under the Whitlam Labor government of 1972-5] had a dream of having huge pipes stretching like large veins throughout Australia to bring gas to all points coming from the North West Shelf. And during those ‘Golden Years’ we witnessed increased Coal output. The Steel Industry operated all day every day.

It never occurred to anyone that danger lay ahead. Some people bought caravans or weekenders. We had our own transport. Housing was affordable and we sent our kids to

University. But Shock, Horror. Something went wrong, something went horribly wrong.

Out of the blue AIS started attacking on two fronts: the Coal Industry and the Steel Industry. Many workers in either industry feared the sack, causing serious anxiety for the workforce and for the Illawarra. Urgent meetings of officials and delegates from the Coal and Steel Industries were convened to determine our reaction.

And now to find answers to the question WHY? Why the sackings? To answer this we need go to where it originated in the Western Australia boardroom of BHP, the platform from where the Company launched its attack. BHP called unions to a meeting to inform them they wanted to talk REDUNDANCIES. To those assembled the company announced it intended to cut steel production Australia-wide with closures at Kwinana (WA), Whyalla (SA), and BHP Newcastle and a reduction in operating to 70% of capacity here in Port Kembla. If you recall the Company's quote in the Industrial Commission on October 1, it said there was a pending recession unfolding in the Steel Industry.

Well the Company knew all about it, it brought on the crisis. By siphoning huge profits from its Steel Division and investing heavily in its lucrative BHP/Esso Oil project the company deliberately exposed our domestic markets to the vagaries of imported steel coming in cheaper and of a better quality from Japan. With such deliberate reduction in Steel manufacture is it any wonder the company could successfully argue it did not need all the coal it could produce?

Mass meetings were convened. In the mining industry merger meetings were called. In the steel industry mass stop work meetings took place.

Despite unions mobilising resistance the company remained determined to carry through with its programme to retrench. In the steelworks the company made known it intended to sack up to 800 steel workers effective mid November. But with the miners it was different; the sackings were instant. No way would the company even hold discussions with the Miners' Federation without first issuing retrenchment notices to all 384 miners.

The Southern District of the Miners' Federation had no alternative but to involve their members in dispute. As a last determined effort to save jobs the men of Kemira pit adopted a seldom used tactic of , 'Refusing to leave the mine.' What was to follow is best described by Paddy Ginnane in the *Illawarra Mercury*:

For all who elected to stay underground the strain became

quite serious. Separated from their wives, their children the strain became even greater as one day joined another.

A much clearer insight into how the men were coping is best illustrated in an underground bulletin produced by Jim Roach, the Lodge Secretary:

We are a combination of volunteers who worked three shifts —dayshift, swingshift and nightshift. Some of us had never met before this. As you may realise, to a great degree we had different sleeping habits and even though there is no day or night down here, the metabolism of the body isn't aware of this and as a result there seemed to be a continual stream of men heading to or from their 'beds' for the first few days. We are about five kilometres underground and we collect our meals from the tunnel mouth at 8am, noon and 5pm. The transport (diesel train) seats 14 men and we adhere strictly to a roster so that every man has at least one trip to the tunnel mouth a day. One of the boys, Shane Williams, is handy with the guitar and we have a lot of sing-songs. We all have dependents, with the exception of two of us, and we look forward to seeing our families and friends at mealtimes, but we are making the most of it for however long it takes us to achieve our goal.

As the campaign gathered momentum there were occasions when the miners and steel workers held separate meetings, at other times they would hold joint meetings. This was so when a call was issued to hold a general stoppage with a mass meeting in the Wollongong Showground. The coming together of coal miners and steel workers was by itself an historic event. The last such occasion may well have been during the Parker dispute some 38 years before. This magnificent meeting was in response to the ground swell of resentment across the whole of the Illawarra with all attention directed towards support for the sit-in miners and with absolute condemnation of BHP.

The meeting of over 20,000 carried a resolution to demonstrate at Parliament House to force the Prime Minister to intervene. Unions proceeded to organise one of the largest gatherings of workers ever mobilised to make the trip. Two train loads were organised, numerous buses were booked and private cars were used. It was a mammoth task.

I would like at this stage to pay tribute to the well-known songwriter and musician Kevin Baker who composed a special song called 'The Men of Kemira'. The song touched on all aspects of the dispute, highlighting the sackings of the men 5km underground by the mine manager at 4 o'clock in the morning.

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Kevin referred to the district support for the men. I do like the verse dealing with the sackings AS A COST CUTTING MEASURE FOR THE GOOD OF THE COMPANY. The chorus is:

*Well we won't cop that said the men inside the mine
You can't cut and run and say we're to blame this time
We won't take the sack, while you your pockets line
You've got a fight with the men of Kemira.*

Another verse deals with the Road to Canberra:

*At the end of the month on trains and buses hired
They headed for Canberra their fuels of anger fired
As they passed working suburbs cheering spoke of mass
support
That showed that working men might be sold but can't be
bought.*

A great atmosphere developed that gave us strength and confidence as we burst through the doors of Parliament House and into the Cabinet Room. But little did we know time was running out. In speaking to Malcolm Fraser we outlined in detail the crisis in the steel industry, the flow on effect in the coal industry, the gloomy effect for the region. We informed him how determined the men at Kemira were and the measures they had taken to protect jobs.

We called on Fraser to restrict the flow of imported steel to allow us to confer with BHP. He asked for how long? When we responded with a call for say 12 months he shook his head. For 6 months he shook his head, and when we suggested 3 months he put his hands on the table and responded. His reply was numbing and threatening. I recall his exact words. 'If my Government was to agree with what the unions put forward your members would suffer, for 8 million tones of coal would lay at grass. Japan would not take delivery'

What did that mean? It meant Japan had to have uninhibited access to our white goods market and steel user industries or they would not take delivery of our raw materials. A deal was done, BHP did not need to invest in steel. It had given away its monopoly.

When we returned home from Canberra, Nando Lelli [Port Kembla branch secretary of the FIA] and I convened a two-day seminar to gather the material that was used to form the basis of the what is now known as the Steel Plan. The miners remained in dispute and this ended only when David Duncan bought down

his recommendation followed by an order that BHP withhold retrenchment notices and reinstate the sacked miners. So ended one of the most traumatic disputes seen in this district.

THE KEMIRA SIT IN WAS OVER.

Now let me refer to another verse from Kevin Baker:

*After sixteen days in a world that knew no sun
The tribunal turned on BHP and concessions had been
won
Not enough to save their jobs but enough to show the
world
That a new fighting banner for the worker was unfurled.*

I'd like to conclude with a personal tribute. The Kemira sit-in occurred during an important period of our history when we were the 'lucky country' with industries and factories structured so as to offer employment to large numbers of workers in the coal and steel industry. Whilst heavy industry in this region did not accept women workers they were able to gain employment in the textile and footwear industry, in firms such as Bonds, Fredells, King Gee and Berlei. In our heyday we could count five shoe factories. We had an enormous construction and metals industry. We lived in a close knit community. We knew everybody and everything. Two newspapers kept us informed. There was plenty of work. We had, maybe a brother or two, working in the pits along side of their father. Uncle, cousins, other brother worked in the Steel Works. Brother-in-law, next door neighbour, school mate or even the bloke you boozed with worked on the wharves or shipping iron ore. So when a dispute occurred you knew all about it, you even knew the people involved. When help was needed it was readily given as was experienced in the Kemira sit-in. I believe this highlights something uniquely Illawarra.

But now things have changed. Globalisation is upon us. No longer do we see labour intensive industries. It's hard to imagine BHP employing up to 10,000 coal miners and 23,000 steel workers located on 800 hectares of land. What we have is a large portion of individual contracts and/or casual and part-time labour replacing permanent staff. With part time wages, high mortgages could pose problems for the unions to be able to organise and to sustain strikes of long duration.

So if the environment and the culture that bonded us together in all our working lives have changed and continue to change we may find it difficult to repeat exactly the type of industrial action that had been the way working people fought the boss prior to globalisation. If that is so we may well say the Kemira Sit In was

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the last big strike of its kind, allowing me to state, industrially speaking: the sun has now set on the people of Kemira and for all those involved you have done us proud.

And now the the names of the men of Kemira, the names of the women of Kemira, and the names of the children of Kemira, will forever emblazon the immortal pages of working class history.