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The Warilla High School Strike: a veritable class struggle

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One of the most interesting things about delving into archives is the way they, on the one hand, alert you to very different times and temperaments and, on the other, remind you that the more things change, the more they remain the same. And so it is with the first months of 1976—thirty years ago and in the early part of the Shame Fraser Shame Government. Different times, indeed, but what could possibly be the same? Industrial relations, in one form or another, was front page news. Early in the year the showdown between unions and the Government involved wage indexation. Under the Whitlam Government an accord (of sorts) had been brokered, whereby wages were to be adjusted to the Consumer Price Index. The ACTU (Australian Council of Trade Unions) pushed in the Arbitration Commission for a full 6.4% wage indexation but the Fraser Government lobbied for half that. Massive industrial action was threatened if the Commission did not agree to full indexation. Meanwhile, Fraser began slashing the Public Service, putting in place a plan for 17,800 fewer public servants than allowed for under Labor’s staff ceilings. Overseas, terrorism was in the news, as the trial of wayward dynastic heiress Patty Hearst began for her role in the Symbionese Liberation Army.

Back home, Wollongong’s own Aunty Jack was in the news (then as now), winning plaudits and awards. So, too, Iraq and shady money featured prominently, although the loans affair was decidedly less corrupt than the current AWB (Australian Wheat Board) scandal. Indeed, at least the loans affair had a noble purpose behind it, crafted (in part) by a local member concerned to retain some public ownership of mineral resources. Fascinatingly, voluntary student unionism was a major issue for
the Illawarra early in 1976. A Wollongong technical college teacher refused to give a lecture because one of the students was not a member of the students’ union. This student, who was also a welfare worker and a member of the misnamed Workers Party (remember Singleton’s strange concoction?), a Mrs. Marie Ingram, described herself as “a conscientious objector” to the $2 student fee (compared to fees of $70 at other technical colleges and $116 at Wollongong University). Take particular note of what else she said: “No man, or group of men, has the right to initiate the use of force, fraud or coercion against any other man, or group of men. This is my philosophy on the matter and I will write to the United Nations demanding my rights as a free person”. Margaret Thatcher was soon to express that same philosophy in her famous line “There is no such thing as society”. And it was around that time—the mid 1970s—that you can trace the steady rise of neoliberal doctrine in countries like Australia, America and Great Britain and the concomitant decline of collectivist thought and practice (although, admittedly, neoliberalism under the Labor Government in the 1980s did have an almost human face).

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The Warilla strike had both local and state-wide implications. It was part of a general struggle by the New South Wales Teachers Federation for smaller class sizes. Specifically, it was put in motion by the removal of a full-time science teacher from Warilla with no replacement being offered. The teacher concerned had been teaching 29 periods a week but was not even teaching science full-time at the new school. The general and the local issues fused. Thus the School’s New South Wales Teachers Federation spokesman Jim Bradley stressed that Warilla, because of its status as a disadvantaged school, had an urgent need for smaller class sizes. Here are the origins of what was to become the differential staff formula, whereby disadvantaged schools were automatically entitled to more staff. The struggle for smaller class sizes was also, of course, a struggle for more teachers and this was at a time when there were 2000 unemployed teachers in New South Wales, including fully qualified science teachers in the Illawarra. So the strike began on Tuesday, 10 February at 1.45 pm. The following
day the 75 striking teachers marched on the Southern Area Education Office demanding a replacement science teacher. They also paid visits to other local high schools to inform fellow teachers of their actions. The first of many sympathy strikes occurred on 13 February when teachers at Warrawong stopped work at 12 pm and pledged to donate to the strike fund. That same day, the Arbitration Commission granted the full 6.4% wage indexation. The class struggle was being reflected in different arenas, but perhaps nowhere as potently as Warilla. It was not, however, just a matter for teachers, for South Coast Labour Council Secretary Merv Nixon made it clear very early in the conflict that all unions in the region supported the Warilla teachers in their specific campaign for a science teacher and the general fight for smaller class sizes. This was, then, a class struggle in more than one sense.

The Department of Education’s defence was that the Warilla science teacher was actually a reserve teacher who had been mistakenly assigned to full-time duties. This was a somewhat peculiar defence as, in a sense, it helped highlight the need for more teachers. The Federation warned of looming regional and state-wide rolling strikes, while the Department issued a directive effectively banning striking teachers from visiting other schools. On 17 February a meeting of 400 parents and students unanimously supported the Warilla teachers in their fight “to improve the conditions of students’ education”. Initially, the local P & C executive had been opposed to the teachers but a palace coup overthrew its conservative leadership.
Meanwhile, Warilla High School’s captain and vice captain told the Illawarra Mercury that all students supported the strike and pointed to other educational problems such as students having to drop history because the Department refused to appoint another history teacher. Student sympathy strikes began at Warrawong and Berkeley High Schools. Teachers in all Illawarra schools pledged $20 a fortnight to the strike fund. Meanwhile, the Area Director of Education, Mr. Brian Gillett, revealed his keen intelligence: “The science teacher question”, he noted “is a blind. The campaign is really about class sizes and the teachers’ campaign to put reserve teachers on full strength”. Radical students at Berkeley, California, in the 1960s had a slogan: “the issue is not the issue”. That slogan captures the spirit of the Warilla High School strike. The ostensible issue was not the only issue precisely because it raised all sorts of other issues to do with the quality of education.

“Meet Region’s Top Rebel” blared the Illawarra Mercury’s headline on 19 February. Could this be about Merv Nixon or Jim Bradley, perhaps? No, it was about the previously mentioned Mrs. Ingram who was not only famous for refusing to pay student union fees. This community-minded woman had also campaigned to have the Church of England stop ringing the church bell in Mount Kembla so loudly and frequently on Sunday mornings. Top rebel, indeed! Meanwhile, the Director General of Education told the Warilla teachers that if the school
needed a science teacher they could appoint one from funds provided by the Disadvantaged Schools Program. This, again, was an acknowledgement that the striking teachers had a solid case. Moreover, it was a reflection of the poor knowledge the Director General possessed regarding the purposes of the Disadvantaged Schools program, which targeted things such as English language training in targeted schools. At Warilla, in fact, a remedial maths class had to stop because of the science teacher’s transfer. So, again, it needs to be stressed that this was a struggle in which the local and general issues were intertwined.

From 23 February Sydney schools joined the rolling stoppages but on that very day 22 of the striking teachers resumed work. Nonetheless, the industrial struggle was still picking up tempo. There were sympathy strikes by cleaners at Warilla High School and the Seamen’s Union stopped work so that the Warilla teachers could address them. The Port Kembla waterside workers passed a resolution supporting the Warilla teachers and Port Kembla High School students staged a sympathy strike. And on 25 February 300 students (including 70 from Smith’s Hill High) marched down Crown Street, Wollongong, with police permission. The Smith’s Hill students held a banner that spoke for all: “Two hour strike for better education”.

The Warilla teachers’ strike highlighted problems with the
educational bureaucracy—its intransigence, its facelessness, its insensitivity (after all, telling the Warilla teachers they could use the Disadvantaged Schools Program was equivalent to “let them eat cake”). Yet as the Illawarra Mercury warned ominously: “For some Department officials, it is a question of law and order: who is running the education system, the Department or the teachers?” In that context, it is important to note that the current attack on public schools is partly, and sometimes mostly, an attack on the Teachers Federation. All the talk of devolution, community control of schools and so on is an attempt to reduce the Federation’s role in educational policy. The more things change, the more things remain the same.

As rolling strikes began in Sydney schools, the Ports Committee, representing eight maritime unions, began to talk of industrial action. Eight maritime unions!—some things do change permanently, after all. Warrawong High School teachers began to demand more staff so that 19 first year students could be given remedial English classes (70% of Warrawong pupils did not have an English speaking background). Community support for the striking teachers came from, amongst other quarters, bread carters who offered free bread and barbers who gave free services. Early in March it was rumoured that the strike would be over as the Department offered a solution—regain a science teacher but transfer a maths teacher to Keira High School. The teachers, nonetheless, voted to continue. After 26 days, 44 were still out (the final number would be 40—“the magnificent 40”). Prospects looked bleak, except for one thing. There was further community support in the form of tugboat crews—30 members of the Fireman and Deckhands’ Union—who walked off the job in

Wendy Nunan, cutting The Magnificent 40 cake, Miller’s Hotel, Oak Flats
support of teachers and tied up around 18 ships. That was when the striking teachers and their union comrades knew they would win. The tugboat strike was critical, just as many years later the longshoreman’s sympathy strikes in California were significant in the MUA (Maritime Union of Australia) dispute.

This was to be a victory for educational quality, as much as anything else. Merv Nixon at that time referred to the teachers’ strike as “the most principled dispute the South Coast Trades and Labour Council had been involved in. They were not seeking money or better conditions for themselves but better conditions for children in a working class area.” The Education Department finally offered to restore all pre-strike conditions and teachers suspended industrial action on 9 March to discuss the proposal. Under the offer, worked out jointly by the Teachers Federation and the Public Service Board, the science teacher would be returned, the maths teacher who had been slotted for Keira High would remain but a social science teacher (arguably surplus to minimum requirements) would be moved. In effect, this was a total victory, one celebrated with a cake at a hotel in Oak Flats (see below and cover illustration). The Department agreed to a state-wide review of reserve teachers which resulted in them being given full loads. And, as already noted, disadvantaged schools were eventually to benefit from a differential staffing formula.

Clive Hamilton argues, in a recent Quarterly Essay What’s Left?, that the labour movement goal of improving material conditions has, because of the spread of affluence, been rendered obsolete. There is some merit to Hamilton’s overall analysis, particularly his critique of the Australian Labor Party. The goals of the labour movement, however, were never just restricted to material progress. They concerned justice, working conditions and community rights—like the right to a decent education. They still do and as the South Coast Labour Council moves further to embrace community unionism it might just consider upholding the Warilla strike as its historical standard-bearer.

‘The Magnificent 40’ cake, Miller’s Hotel, Oak Flats