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The Illawarra Trades and Labour Council in Depression, Recovery and War: 1926-1945 continued

Abstract

Chapter 3. Into the Depression

The Illawarra Trades And Labour Council In Depression, Recovery And War, 1926–45 *continued*

Shirley Nixon

Chapter 3. Into the Depression

The Illawarra Trades and Labour Council was led for fourteen years by its lone paid official, Mr S. (Steve) Best. Steve LBest was appointed the first paid secretary-organiser of the IT&LC in 1928, having been its honorary secretary since its inception in 1926, when he was, with 'Paddy' Molloy, a prime mover in its revitalisation. Steve Best had been sacked from Coledale Colliery in 1926, while a member of the Miners' Federation, for following union policy, and was subsequently unable to find work in any district mines. While working on the construction site at Hoskins Ltd., his attempts at organisation of the workers there led to his dismissal once again. Steve Best was a radical who remained 'in but not of the Labor Party', who never became a member of the Communist Party, but who remained on good terms and worked fruitfully with a wide range of radical members of the labour movement throughout his life. He was a popular figure in the district, and like Fred Lowden, was a member of Corrimal Bowling Club.

A colleague described him as an ideal secretary of the Trades and Labour Council – 'trustworthy, efficient, a good Labor Party member, progressive'. Another colleague, himself a Communist, thought Best may have secretly been a Communist, so apt and progressive were his methods of work and his policies, while still another Communist colleague said that Steve Best 'at the very least' had great sympathy with Communist ideas. Steve Best certainly supported the view that the socialisation of industry was a proper aim for unionists. As the leader of the combined union movement in the Illawarra, he established the Wollongong Socialisation Unit in August 1930 and was probably the author

or co-author of the 'Education in Socialist Theory' articles which appeared in the *South Coast Times* from August 1930 for several weeks. In addition to his commitment to radical politics, Steve Best had a reputation for thinking carefully before he acted, and for being a person of quiet authority and great personal charm, with whom it was hard to quarrel. Both he and 'Paddy' Molloy have been described by a Communist colleague as militant ALP members, never Communists, but

... Better than Communists in some ways. ... He quietly responded to a question from A. Lysaght, member for Bulli, as to why he mixed with a bad type like me; that he believed the reason for our visit ought to concern Lysaght more than who he came with. Steve mixed with Communists and did not mind.

(They had formed a deputation to Lysaght asking for housing improvements for humpy dwellers.) Such a man was well-equipped to fill the role of leader of the Trades and Labour Council through the vicissitudes of the labour movement in the Depression years.

In June 1929, a new sub-branch of the Federated Ironworkers' Association was formed at Port Kembla, with J. Ward who had come from the Lithgow Hoskins works, as its secretary. The FIA '... could count its Wollongong members on one hand at that time'. These few were 'imported' with the works from Lithgow and Rhodes, a Sydney suburb, and they set about unionising other workers in Hoskins Steelworks. Of ninety-five workers in the spun pipe department, all were union members by the end of 1929, recruited by the small band of dedicated unionists who had been imported. Such successes were not easily won, for recruiting to unionism had to be discreet, to avoid the hostility to all unions of the Hoskins management falling on individual heads of unionised workers. The Steelworks management had a strategy of inviting key workers or good workers to become salaried staff members. As staff members, the men had to relinquish union membership, but they were not given a different job or higher wages. What they were given was continuity of employment and eligibility for a modest provident fund. The price of refusing an offer from the management to a staff appointment was often dismissal, and always blacklisting. Often men 'chose' to become salaried staff because they feared for their small families, believing the alternative would bring only starvation for their children. They worked overtime often and could be called back to work at any time of the day or week, regardless of how recently they had knocked off.

Illawarra Unity

The fears of vulnerable bread-winners and the ever-present crowd of men waiting for work on the Hill, where the Steelworks employment office was situated, made the late twenties and early thirties difficult times indeed for the growth and development of unionism. In early 1928 a harbinger of the Trades and Labour Council's later work with the unemployed people of the thirties was reported in the local press. In February 1928 a deputation waited on the State Government to express its concern that unemployment was so serious and the housing shortage so extreme in Wollongong.

A delegate from the Australian Railways Union was appointed to represent the Trades and Labour Council and he was to report back to a special meeting of the Council. The previous meeting of the Trades and Labour Council had decided to 'write to all the unemployed of the district to be present' [to hear the report of the deputation] as it was in 'their interests that the Council is acting'. Individual unions and the Trades and Labour Council nevertheless kept up attempts to encourage and extend unionism. By 1929 the Amalgamated Engineering Union and the Federated Ironworkers Association were able to claim local membership of about one hundred each.

Within the Trades and Labour Council itself, unionists established a Building Trades Group as a further means of consolidation. The carpenters, painters and builders' labourers' unions formed a consultative group in the hope of better defending their members' rights. This group within the Council was first mooted in 1927, and was the first composite branch of building workers in Australia.

But it was a frail hold that unions had on organising in the face of the Hoskins' company's ready access to new labour should workers displease them. The crowd standing each day outside the Company's employment office was a constant and graphic reminder to unionists that the odds were against them in the struggle to increase their influence. As the new decade arrived only about a third of Wollongong workers belonged to a union, and the new Port Kembla steelworks construction was growing at the hands of about five hundred workers who could have been members of the Australian Workers' Union but who remained non-union labour.

In the late twenties workers and union officials in the Hoskins Steelworks who belonged to the FIA occasionally considered joining forces with the AWU or another metalworkers' union to increase their power to oppose the strong anti-union attitudes of the Hoskins company. Inter-union rivalry and the problems associated with integration of craft and what was then essentially

a labourers' union prevented it.

The AWU was despised by more militant unions for this failure to bring its large potential membership into the fold, and was blamed, too, for some of the difficulty other unions, such as the FIA, had when they tried to recruit workers to their organisations. The reluctance shown by workers at the FIA's first attempts to form the union at Port Kembla was said to be based on their observations of how the AWU failed to help its members.

The difficulties for unionists in organising were not specific to the district. Even the senior union, the Miners' Federation, had lost forty percent of its membership by 1931, after the crisis in the whole New South Wales coal industry which arose out of declining prosperity in the coal industry due to falling demand and over-production. The southern coalfields production had dropped by sixteen percent in the five years between 1923 and 1928. There was a period of remission in this decline during 1929 owing to the Newcastle coalmine lockouts, when coal production in the southern fields increased by almost half a million tons to 2,311,208 tons.

Production fell from that point in two years to only 984,496 tons in 1931. Production in excess of demand brought not only short time to miners themselves with its attendant loss of pay, but also had serious implications for the fledgling Trades and Labour Council. Fees for the miners' affiliation were a significant part of Council income. When these were not forthcoming the modus operandi of the Council had to change, to accommodate a reduced budget.

The manufacturing industries which operated in Port Kembla also faced declining demand for their products in the late 1920's and early 1920's. The Electrolytic Refining and Smelting Co. Ltd., and Metal Manufactures which had operated since 1908 and 1918 respectively, and Australian Fertilizers Ltd., established in 1921, all had members of the AWU which was affiliated to the Labour Council. Deteriorating economic conditions placed great stress on the Illawarra Trades and Labour Council's attempts to maintain its own strength or that of its affiliates. In late 1929 fourteen unions were affiliated with the Council. By 1931 the move towards disaffiliation from Labour Council, either because of inability to pay the affiliation fee or because their affiliation seemed pointless in the light of the Trades and Labour Council's impotence, was reducing the Council's ability to act in support of affiliates. In turn, the loss of member unions decreased the Labour Council's ability to offer any real assistance to its remaining members. The Port Kembla Ironworkers had to ask their State executive for financial assistance to pay their Federal

Illawarra Unity

affiliation fee in 1930, and in 1931 George Sloan, Waterside Workers' delegate to the Labour Council resigned because he believed '... the Council in no way functioned for this branch'.

By late 1931 the Illawarra Trades and Labour Council existed in an informal way only. The union activists met in late 1931 and resolved to '... keep the name of the Council alive. They met once a month and tackled the problems of the Unemployed Workers' Movement mainly, and other social issues'. Even before this coming to terms with falling numbers of affiliates, the Illawarra Trades and Labour Council looked for ways to connect the social with the political issues, and to serve both purposes. In January 1930 a letter to the *South Coast Times* from the Trades and Labour Council appealed to Wollongong people to take a child or children of locked-out Northern miners till the Newcastle mines began to operate again. The letter argued that such a scheme would knit North and South Coast mining families together, and therefore unify and make solid the working class. Whether any northern children reached the South Coast under the proposal is not clear, but it seems unlikely, as settlement of the northern coal mines lockout took place at the end of May 1930.

Northern visitors to Wollongong who did arrive as guests of the Council in March 1930 were the members of Kurri Kurri Pipe Band. They had come to perform to raise funds for the Northern coalfields workers who had been locked out for almost fifteen months. They were to prove significant in the development of one of the Illawarra Trades and Labour Council's most unifying campaigns to that date. In keeping with its previously expressed policy, the Wollongong Municipal Council refused the required permission for the pipe band to march in the streets as the Labour Council desired. A further application from the Miners' Federation was refused by the Mayor of Wollongong, Mr W.L. Howarth who had not consulted the full Municipal Council. The political leaning of Mayor Howarth was conservative, and he was a representative of the rural and commercial families who had traditionally filled official positions in the Illawarra.

The Trades and Labour Council and the Miners' Federation were outraged at the Mayor's assertion that neither of them had any connection with the Kurri Kurri Pipe Band members. Both the Miners' Federation and the Labour Council, even more than other workers throughout New South Wales, felt affinity with the locked out northern miners, and such feelings had been given a great emotional component when a young miner was shot and killed at Rothbury during an angry clash between miners on picket and police.

Illawarra Unity

Neither the Labour Council nor the Miners' Federation was prepared to accept the insult. The Kurri Kurri pipers did march, led by both Steve Best of the Labour Council and Fred Lowden of the Miners' Federation. Although some pipe band members were threatened with prosecution, the counter threat of Lowden not to hold a May Day Festival (when Wollongong's shops did a roaring trade) discouraged the Municipal Council from pursuing the charges and none were eventually made. Mayor Howarth, however, decided to remain firm in his intention to keep the unemployed out of the city streets and declared that all requests for permission to hold street meetings would be 'absolutely refused'.

One veteran of this period described the labour movement's response to this Municipal decision as 'a rallying point'. The Trades and Labour Council established a South Coast Free Speech Committee which had the sole duty 'to preserve the right to express an opinion' for Illawarra workers. Neither the Municipal Council, nor the marchers in this conflict were, at first, prepared to concede.

The Labour Council at last had a cause which would equally involve both workers and those out of work in its winning. A prolonged campaign of some eighteen months, during which street meetings were held every Friday night at the corner of Church and Crown Streets, the heart of the commerce district of Wollongong, concluded with success for the protestors.

The success of the Free Speech Campaign for the labour movement did not simply reside in the fact that the speakers persevered in their resolve again and again to be arrested and gaoled rather than pay fines. It was not simply that the campaigners ultimately outlasted the Municipal Council's willingness to take the offenders through the courts. The success was far-reaching in that the campaign of a year-and-a-half forged new organising skills in men who had prior experience only in union affairs; it had brought to leadership and to wider experiences and social relationships some members of the Unemployed Workers' Movement who had previously worked only in their own suburbs of Corrimal, Fairy Meadow, Bulli or Port Kembla. One leader of the unemployed, Len Boardman, had no home from 1930 to 1934 but lived 'house to house' with colleagues, ensuring that all sections of the UWM were informed about each others' activities.

Although the sole stated purpose of the Wollongong Free Speech Campaign was to preserve the right to express an opinion, it provoked the attention of another grouping in society, the New Guard. The New Guard was established in February 1931 shortly

Illawarra Unity

after the election of J.T. Lang to office in the New South Wales government. Its members claimed to be convinced that ruin was being brought upon New South Wales by the Lang Government and the Communist Party, and they had organised themselves into para-military groups to preserve 'law and order'. Many of its members were ex-servicemen who were bitter at their failure to gain work. Other members felt that the tendency of growing numbers of the unemployed to demonstrate on the streets was the sign that 'civil strife' which would be a threat to property could soon break out. The New Guard stood for 'unswerving loyalty to the Throne' and claimed that its only driving forces were loyalty, patriotism and common sense, and a determination to foil any attempt by the Government to foist socialisation on the people.

In the Illawarra, where hundreds of unemployed were encamped in humpies and tents, where dole queues generated 'ready made meetings' for the Unemployed Workers' Movement's organisers and where street marches for Free Speech Rights were held in defiance of the Municipal Council, two localities of the New Guard arose in response, one each at Bulli and Wollongong. They were established in the very month, August 1931, that the Illawarra Trades and Labour Council ceased to function formally. Open conflict with the New Guard at public meetings of the Free Speech Campaign seems to have helped develop the feeling of mutuality of interests among Illawarra unemployed and unionists. Planning the campaign in all its ramifications seems to have compensated for the cessation of the Labour Council's formal meetings. A Workers' Defence Corps was formed to protect speakers and assembled audiences during the Free Speech Campaign meetings and provided a defence against 'the A.I.S bosses and the hierarchy of the district who assisted or joined the New Guard and paid money to any "low-lifer" who would beat up meetings of the Free Speech Campaign, the Communist Party, the Unemployed Workers or even the AWU

The Unemployed Workers' Movement was one of the Communist Party front organisations which were effective in the thirties in the Communist Party's plan to form 'bridges to the masses'. Others were Friends of the Soviet Union, the Movement Against War and Fascism and the Militant Minority Movement. The UWM was formed in 1930 and was a rapid success because of the vast number of unemployed at that time. By 1934 when it began to work with other unemployed organisations it claimed 68,000 members in the Eastern States of Australia. In Wollongong it developed an efficient self help system for its members, organised through those who had been Trades and Labour

Illawarra Unity

Council delegates, such as Steve Best, Len Boardman, Jack Cranston and others like Robert Shayler who had initiated the South Coast Division of the Unemployed Workers' Movement. Robert Shayler believed that the unemployed movement should avoid acting as distributors of charity and, although he thought that it was more important that the unemployed be organised '... against the danger of being used by the employers in their attacks on wages and working conditions', he was able to work productively with the secretary of the Illawarra Trades and Labour Council, Steve Best.

In May 1930 the UWM claimed 3,000 members and declared their demands to be 'work at trade union rates of pay' or 'maintenance [i.e., unemployment benefits] at trade union rates of pay'. Self help took many forms and often was organised through the Labour Council in both its formal and informal periods. Vegetables were grown, soup kitchens set up, fish caught and rabbits trapped and clothes shared and sewn. One person remembered

... the women in this town were miraculous marvellous. They even helped us when we got on to the 1914 heap of coal at Bellambi – the old Bellambi jetty. It was put there for war purposes and was still there when the war was over. All the Unemployed Movement from Port Kembla to Austinmer were organised to bring vehicles. Any old kind of vehicle would do. You never seen such a rag-tag transport company in your life as that lot ...The coal was cleared in about six weeks, 50 000 tons of coal, for and by the unemployed.

The Free Speech Campaign and the UWM had fashioned a broad alliance amongst the working class and had given trade union officials and Steve Best of the Illawarra Trades and Labour Council new allies from the rank and file of workers and unemployed alike. Among these new leaders were many Communists and Communist sympathisers. Len Boardman, Ernie Briemle, Robert Allen, Pat McHenry, Paddy Molloy, and John (Jack) Martin were not strangers to militancy. Some, like Boardman and Briemle, were not local workers, and had migrated from overseas.

Len Boardman joined the Communist Party in Wollongong soon after he arrived. Out of work, he joined the UWM and became its secretary. All these men courageously worked with Steve Best and others throughout the Depression trying to help in all the difficulties which faced people who were out of work or on short time. Whether people were threatened with evictions, unable to get dole tickets or had any other problems to bring to their

Illawarra Unity

attention someone was always available to help. The Illawarra Trades and Labour council, as such, did not function after August 1931, but the workers of the Illawarra found an 'ethos of mutuality' which they had not known before in the Free Speech Campaign and in the Unemployed Workers' Movement which took them into the period of recovery from the Depression with a stronger sense of community and with revitalized ideas about their communal dignity and rights.

Chapter Four. Turning The Tide

The Illawarra Trades and Labour Council's 1926–31 period covered the fall of the Bruce-Page government and the rise and fall of the Scullin federal government. The Labor government of J.H. Scullin was the overseer of the Premiers' Plan, the means by which the economy of Australia was to be brought under control. All governments, State and federal, agreed through their Premiers to reduce government expenditure by twenty per cent, to increase taxation, and, by various fiscal measures, to restore the Australian economy by the method of progressive reduction in the budget deficits.

During the 1932–35 period of the Illawarra Trades and Labour Council's quiescence, the Australian economy began its recovery from the deep depression of 1931–32. The recovery began as early as 1932–33 and steadily continued until in 1935–36 the total national product was six percent greater than the previous peak level attained in 1926–27.

In the Illawarra, there were encouraging signs of improvement in the sale of A.I.S. products, and forecasts in the local press were predicting a brighter future by 1933. Coal consumption, coke production and iron and steel production at AI&S all increased sharply in 1933 with steadily climbing production levels from thereon. More importantly for Illawarra people who were seeking work, the number of employees in the Steelworks reached 3,500 in 1935, some four and a half times the number who worked there in 1931. At the same time, the volume of trade through the Port Kembla Harbour began to rise steadily. From a total tonnage of both imports and exports in 1931–32 at Port Kembla of 389,888 tons, the figure rose to 2,221,991 tons in the last year of the decade.

In 1935 the Steelworks which, since 1928 had been known as Australian Iron and Steel Ltd, was taken over by Broken Hill

Illawarra Unity

Proprietary Limited. Australian Iron and Steel Ltd was the product of the amalgamation of Hoskins Ltd., from Lithgow, with two English companies, Dorman Long and Company and Paldwins, and an Australian shipping and coal-mining company called Howard Smith Ltd.

The amalgamation which formed A.I. & S. had been forced upon the Hoskins Steelworks when it was discovered the firm did not have the financial resources to build the large modern steelworks which had been envisaged in undertakings which Hoskins had made with the State government in return for the building of the Moss Vale-Port Kembla railway. BHP's takeover in 1935 had been made possible by the strong position that company was in, especially vis-a-vis AI&S, in its Newcastle steelworks. AI&S had been caught by the Depression in the midst of its reconstruction and transfer from Lithgow. The Depression drop in markets and the disruptions in its business caused by its move to Port Kembla had made it vulnerable to the takeover by BHP. The company thus formed, BHP/AI&S Ltd, was reported to be one of the most important and influential companies in Australia.

It certainly was the most significant enterprise in the Illawarra, superseding the coal mines, of which it owned many, as the chief employer in the district. BHP/AI&S set about an extensive development programme, building coke ovens and a by-product plant in 1937, and opening a new blast furnace that year also. The old blast furnace was re-conditioned in 1938, and two new rolling mills and ten new soaking pits (where steel ingots are prepared for rolling) were brought into use. Electricity became the source of power in the Steelworks by the end of the thirties. In spite of the reconstruction at the Port Kembla works, steel production lifted only to the point where it just satisfied its rapidly expanding markets. The demand for steel was increasing in the mining, transport and manufacturing industries, as well as in residential and commercial building. Public works construction increased adding its pressure on demand, as did diversification in the rural industry.

It was these economic factors which caused the company's decision to modernise the Port Kembla works, and, at the same time, to keep the plant operating at a level which would keep existing markets supplied. The solution which BHP/AI&S found to the inadequacy of the steelworks to satisfy the demands of the market was to require its employees to work overtime. The demands of the modernisation programme and of the construction work, coupled with ready markets for the steel products placed great stress on the people employed at BHP/

Illawarra Unity

AI&S. Steel workers at Port Kembla toiled amidst foul smells, dirty air and equipment and noisy machinery. Hostility from the management to any sign of unionism was forthcoming from all levels of authority. Throughout the thirties, too, men seeking work stood on 'the Hill', anxious for employment and a constant reminder to men at work that others were willing to fill their places, even though the tempo of industrial growth in the district was greatly increased by BHP's expansion. Lysaghts Pty Ltd, Commonwealth Oil Refineries and the service industries all helped to maintain the impetus, and to provide employment.

The growth in the manufacturing sector of the Illawarra economy was, however, not great enough to absorb either the number of workers who were drawn to the district by the possibility that they would find employment, nor those locals who were still out of work. The population increase brought about by the influx of people hoping for work placed great pressure on accommodation in the district which already included tent villages at Flinders Street, Port Kembla and at other places where the campers could hope not to be harassed. These places were of course, the least desirable areas of the district and frequently were poorly drained and difficult to maintain in a sanitary state. The most popular camp was the Flinders Street site, for this gave a view of 'the Hill' outside the Steelworks, where any sign that work was offering would first be seen.

Rents and building costs rose greatly, so that even people in work could not afford a roof of any size over their heads. Local Municipal Councils made various attempts to control and supervise the tent camps but without much success. The sheer size of the problem was daunting enough for local government without the intransigent attitude of BHP/AI&S, who refused to consider establishing a housing scheme for Port Kembla such as they had implemented at Whyalla in South Australia. The State Government, too, deliberated on the problem without proceeding to action until 1938, when it built what became known as Spoonerville, sixty-five cottages of timber and canvas and twenty barracks for single men which consisted of small cubicles, with no amenities. A newspaper report in 1935 estimated the number of homes needed even then to be two hundred and fifty.

The economic recovery in the Illawarra, marked as it was by the paradox of both an increasing industrial base and persistently high unemployment figures, and by a serious shortage of housing and high rents for what was available, gave South Coast activists issues to focus their efforts upon.

We had an unemployed workers Housing Trust and we set about trying to build houses people could afford. We did too, but

Illawarra Unity

only about twenty, I think. People had to live where they could. The Labour Council set up a Housing Committee, too.

If the Government seemed slow and uncaring about Wollongong housing needs, it had plans for young men on the dole. It had issued an instruction that single young men who were on the dole should either go to live in a tent camp in Cambewarra Shire, 'a mountainous district between the Coast and the Tablelands, including Kangaroo Valley' or they would be deprived of food relief. At the camp, the men were to be given one week's work in five by the government. Since there was no other work offering in the Cambewarra district, it was argued that the young men who were sent there would be at a disadvantage in the job market, whereas if living in the Illawarra they might find work in industry. Four protest meetings were held in all, at Port Kembla, Slacky Flat, Corrimal and Wollongong, at which prominent members of the Miners' Federation, FEDFA, United Labourers, the ARU, Building Trades Federation, Moulders Union, the FIA and the Amalgamated Engineering Union attended. At the Wollongong meeting, Mr W. (Bill) Orr remarked that it was time the Australian Labor Party got together with the Communists and all organisations which worked to further the cause of workers for their mutual benefit.

Orr was a member of the Militant Minority Movement and had, with Charles Nelson, also of the MMM, won leadership in the Miners' Federation in 1934. His public overtures to the Australian Labor Party members at the protest meeting were in accord with the Communist Party policy of the time – united front action with other workers and unionists. As the MMM paper *Red Leader* put it, the time was right to appreciate that different localities had different problems and to work with the Labor Party on the issues which different regions were concerned with. This was the Australian Communist Party's way of meeting the wishes of the Comintern that Communists throughout the world should form bonds with suitable allies to stop the march of Fascism. It was in contrast to the policies which the Communist Party had previously held since 1929, when those who advocated or resorted to arbitration within the democratic structure were branded 'social fascists'. W. (Bill) Orr, and other Communists, seized such issues as the Cambewarra single men's camp to develop their influence in the community, and to demonstrate the shared concerns of all workers, and the value of the united front.

In Wollongong, another Communist, W. (Bill) McDougall had arrived in 1934 to supplement the work of his Party, having been chosen for the task because he had worked in AI& S in 1930, losing his job when the Depression drastically cut demand for

Illawarra Unity

steel and the Steelworks sacked one thousand of fourteen hundred workers. In an article headed 'Party Life' in *Workers' Weekly*, Bill McDougal wrote in September 1935:

The workers on the South Coast are engaged in a struggle against the combined attacks of the Shire Council, the colliery companies, and the Government. The attempts to introduce slave camps is the central issue.

In the course of the struggle a Trades and Labour Council has been formed, with the task of developing closer unity in the trade union movement and of building shop and job committees as the foundation for developing unionism on the basis of industry.

In the *South Coast Times* the re-activation of the Labour Council on 14 September 1935 was reported by Mr F. Lowden, President of the Miners' Federation on the South Coast, who said the purpose of the Illawarra Trades and Labour Council was 'to bring closer unity among the toilers in the South Coast area'. Mr Lowden had been elected President, and the man who had founded the position, Steve Best, became secretary/organiser again.

At the inaugural meeting, representatives from the Southern Branch of the Miners, the Australian Railways Union, the Carpenters, the Mining Mechanics, United Labourers, Federated Ironworkers, the Blacksmiths, and the District Council of Unemployed were in attendance. The unionists present sent fraternal greetings to all similar bodies and pledged to 'organise the workers against war and fascism [sic] and ... further ... to work wholeheartedly for the repeal of the infamous Crimes Act'. The reference to the Crimes Act (1926) provided continuity in the Labour Council's story for it had been in the year of the Crimes Act's introduction that the Illawarra Trades and Labour Council had previously reformed. The Crimes Act declared 'revolutionary and seditious' associations unlawful, and strengthened the Commonwealth government's hand for dealing with strikes and strikers. This obvious attack on unionism was still on the statute books and still a source of anxiety, especially for Communists who felt this was clear evidence of the State's support for capitalists against workers. The Labor Council of New South Wales received letters in August 1935 calling for the Council to oppose the use of the Crimes Act, because it was '... specially designed for war purposes', and for '... the suppression of working class activities'. This the New South Wales Labor Council agreed to do because of the delegates' wish to create

Illawarra Unity

unity within the labour movement.

Fred Lowden, as President, reported the intention of the Illawarra Trades and Labour Council to invite the FEDFA, the WWF, Shop Assistants, Meat Industry Employees and the Bread Carters, the Printers and the Amalgamated Engineering Union to send representatives to the next meeting which was to be held in the Miners Hall on 25 September. Mr Lowden postulated that

If the whole of these [unions] together with those already represented on the Council were to regularly attend we would have the necessary cohesion among the workers of this district which, until just recently, has been conspicuous by its absence.

This statement in support of unity, and the resolve to fight war and Fascism indicate the influence of Communist thinkers in the Illawarra Trades and Labour Council. Many in the labour movement were anxious to maintain neutrality for Australia in the event of any overseas conflict, and they were opposed to Australians sacrificing their lives over such issues. Others believed that the march of Fascism in Spain and Abyssinia ought to be opposed by economic sanctions or even by joining in combat. The Australian Government felt wholly bound to Britain, which had begun to favour the policy of appeasement towards the German and Italian Governments' increasingly expansionist policies.

It cannot be assumed, though, that the leaders in the Illawarra Trades and Labour Council were members of the Communist Party because of the language of its reports and resolutions. A colleague of Steve Best and Fred Lowden, of Paddy Molloy and of Ernest Briemle, a militant all his life, has said that Steve Best and Paddy Molloy were never in the Communist Party, and that Fred Lowden earned opprobrium from some Communists for his refusal ever to join. On the other hand, Pat McHenry and Ernest Briemle of the Unemployed Movement made no secret of their Communist affiliations and enjoyed cordial associations with others, who, though sympathisers, did not join the CPA.

In 1935 when Italy under Mussolini invaded Abyssinia, the members of another successful Communist front, the Movement against War and Fascism (MAWAF) had, behind them, the successful campaign which was conducted around Egon Kisch. The success of this episode in gaining public support was enhanced by the publicity given to the opinions of many prominent Australians, such as Katharine Susannah Pritchard and Vance Palmer, who said that the Australian Government's attempt to prevent Egon Kisch, a Czech writer, from entering Australia was interference with civil liberties.

Illawarra Unity

Wollongong Communists held the view, as did Communists around the world, that Germany, Italy and Japan were preparing for war on Russia. In making the theme of the 1935 May Day Procession opposition to war and Fascism, and passing resolutions of support for ‘... solidarity with the workers of the world against Fascism and Imperialist Wars’ the Miners’ Federation gave indication of the politics of their leadership and of many of the rank and file members too.

The ACTU Congress of 1935 had opposed ‘war in all its forms’ and involvement of Australian workers in overseas conflicts. But when Congress next met in 1937 the mood of delegates had changed considerably. They decided to support the government and the people of Spain and to step up assistance to the Spanish Relief finance appeal. The Miners’ Federation in the Illawarra through their officers were also advocates of this policy, as was the Illawarra Trades and Labour Council. The Labour Council spoke out strongly against the ‘Fascist Aggression’ once the ACTU had taken such a definite stand.

The Spanish Civil War seemed a clear issue for opponents of war and, like Communists, they believed that the threat of Fascism to legitimate governments was evident in the German and Italian governments’ open support for the rebels who had attempted a military coup in Spain. The Illawarra Trades and Labour Council voted to support the Spanish Relief Committee which had been established in Sydney, setting up a local Spanish Relief Fund and regularly reporting news of two Communists from Port Kembla who had gone to Spain to fight in the International Brigade. The presence of two local young men in the midst of battle kept news of the Spanish Civil War in union journals and Labour Council minutes, through which their colleagues at home were reminded of the struggle in Spain. The struggle at home had not lessened for some, however.

Illawarra people who had not yet shared in the effects of the economic recovery felt bitter, as can be seen by the long article in the *South Coast Times* late in the winter of 1935. The writer likened the Abyssinians who were being ‘freed’ by Mussolini to ‘Australian wage slaves’ concluding that

Australia is one of the few countries in the world that does not compel the slave owners to provide for their slaves, whether they have use for them or not. Perhaps when M. Mussolini [sic] has freed the Abyssinian he might do something for his white brother in Australia. Our need is greater than theirs.

The need was indeed still considerable and was brought to the attention of the Prime Minister of Australia, Mr J.A. Lyons

Illawarra Unity

when he visited Wollongong in October 1935. Mrs Croft, the Secretary of the South Coast Relief Committee, supported by Pat McHenry who represented the Trades and Labour Council and the district Council of Unemployed, took part in a deputation of 'all bodies on the coast' which waited on the Prime Minister. Mrs Croft spoke of '... 2,700 people still living in bag humpies, living in worse conditions than some peoples' horses', and said that the forty-six young men who had been denied food relief because they refused to go to the Cambewarra camp had been unjustly treated, saying 'it was better for them to remain at home where they had home influence'. Other speakers claimed that suffering on the South Coast had reached its limit.

With unemployment still high, housing needs desperate, the threat of war beginning to loom over Europe and a revived Council which had a broad representation of steel workers, miners, builders and service industries, the officers of the Illawarra Trades and Labour Council set about consolidation and extension of unions within the district. One veteran of the thirties remembered:

The FIA, the Miners' Federation, FEDFA, and the Shop Assistants were the main unions in Labour Council. On the whole unions wanted to join the Council. Many of us used the fact that there were unions with strong membership, like the Miners (in the Labour Council) to build our own organisations. We would persuade non-unionists that they should join their appropriate union, because the union, as an affiliate of the Labour Council, could call on great strength and support in times of dispute.

Steve Best, 'trustworthy, progressive, efficient' was regarded as an ideal Trades and Labour Council secretary and under his leadership it grew in both numbers and stature. By 1937 sixteen unions were affiliated with the Trades and Labour Council and it had regained general recognition as the chief spokesman for trade unions in the district. Steve Best was '... one of the best at working together to show we could go on in employment with public respect and our organising skills, as we had done while out of work. We were determined to have the Labour Council work again'.

In 1935, immediate issues for the Illawarra Trades and Labour Council were the worries about mechanisation in the mining industry, and the re-introduction of the Permissible Income Regulations, as well as the concern about international affairs. Under the Permissible Income Regulations a worker became eligible for relief or for the dole only after two weeks' unemployment, and if registered for seven days at a Labour

Illawarra Unity

Exchange. The regulations also set levels at which income would render a worker ineligible for the dole at very low levels. While the basic wage was at £3.8.6, the dole was at 14/-, while a relief worker earned £1.0.3 for thirteen hours work. The organised trade unions became alarmed about the Permissible Incomes Regulations when they were used to declare that work being done at award rates was now 'relief work' and would be paid at relief rates. The Labor Council of New South Wales directed that both employed and unemployed should campaign against the undermining of the awards and against the dismissal of workers under awards in order that they could be replaced by relief workers. The Illawarra Trades and Labour Council resolved to fight any such attacks on workers in the district, and to co-operate with the Unemployed and Relief Workers to gain reinstatement for the unemployed on relief work who had recently been sacked because of rigid application of the Permissible Incomes Regulations.

Mechanisation as a threat to mineworkers' jobs had been closely analysed in a document prepared by the new Communist leaders of the Miners' Federation, Orr and Nelson in 1935. In addition to reduced employment, Orr and Nelson claimed that mechanisation in the mines would place pressure on miners to work faster and produce more, for even smaller wages, as anarchic competition among the employers kept the price of coal at an impossibly low level. The solution proposed by the miners' leaders included the introduction of a shorter working week and opposition to mechanisation. The most urgent need was, however, to restore the 12 per cent wage cut which had been imposed since the defeat of the miners in 1929. Orr and Nelson recommended in their thirty-two page analysis of mineworkers' problems that direct action should be taken as a matter of policy.

The proposing of strike action to miners who had suffered chronic unemployment for several years must have seemed absurd to them, but the leadership's policy of conciliation first, then strike action if it failed was adopted and built upon during 1935 and 1936. Some miners believed that the log of claims drawn up by their union's executive officers during this period 'sounded wonderful, but we did not think it was really attainable, like a dream, or a promise of Heaven'. It was this period, between 1935 and the strike of 1938 when substantial reforms were won, that many miners remember as the crucial period for all workers. The paid annual leave of ten or eleven days, and a forty hour week of five consecutive eight hour days which were won then set a bench mark for all workers to reach. One retired miner has claimed:

Illawarra Unity

We brought up the working conditions not only of miners but of the whole of Australia ... The miners laid the foundation for every condition you've got in Australia today.

The Illawarra Trades and Labour Council gave moral support, passed resolutions and publicised the miners' struggle for their log of claims but was not centrally involved. The miners' organisation was superb and included for the first time the formal participation of women through the Miners' Women's Auxiliaries.

By the end of 1935, three months after re-forming, Steve Best was able to report to the Labour Council's pre-Christmas meeting that the 'big majority of union branches had now affiliated, and two more were planning to do so soon'. In the Illawarra, the united front which the Communist Party of Australia formally adopted in 1935 was already a practical reality. Communists and Labor Party members had long worked together and the success of the Illawarra Trades and Labour Council in drawing the local unions together represented at a formal level that ability to work together.