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The Dalfram Dispute Memorial Plaque

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The Dalfram Dispute Memorial Plaque

Abstract

In November 1937 the South Coast Branch of the Waterside Workers Federation (WWF) carried the following resolution at their monthly meeting: "We note with horror the unprovoked and murderous attack of the Japanese militarists against the peace loving Chinese people and lodge an emphatic protest and demand the application of the League Covenant be put into operation against Japan. Furthermore, we as members of the Australian working class are prepared to assist the Chinese workers in their fight against Fascist Japan". Japan had invaded China in 1937 and stories of brutality towards Chinese civilians soon were heard in Australia.

Dalfram Dispute Memorial Plaque erected in Port Kembla

Mairi Petersen

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The ship, the Dalfram, came into Port Kembla to pick up ‘pig iron’ for Japan from BHP in 1938. The Port Kembla wharfies would not load the ship, the United Australia Party Government, with Menzies as Attorney General and Minister for Industry, introduced licensing, the wharfies refused to take out the licenses and so BHP closed its steelworks. The strike continued for a month, the ship was not loaded, and then the Government reconsidered its trade policy with Japan. The Port Kembla wharfies showed their solidarity with the Chinese workers at that time, Bob Menzies earned the nickname “Pig Iron Bob”, and one of the most famous disputes in Australian trade union history had occurred.

The Illawarra Branch of the Society for the Study of Labour History has a great interest in the Dalfram dispute. In December 2006 the Society erected a Plaque to commemorate that dispute, located near the Number 4 Jetty at Port Kembla, where that historic action occurred. Her Excellency Madam Fu Yng, the Chinese Ambassador, came from Canberra to unveil the Plaque. More than 100 people joined us for the ceremony. Prior to the ceremony, we set up a photographic exhibition in the Ports Corporation Training Centre. Guests were fascinated

by the collection of photos, newspaper articles, cartoons from the press of 1938, and other pieces of memorabilia that some retired wharfies had loaned us. The Lord Mayor of Wollongong officially welcomed the Ambassador to the city and the Chinese, Australian and Wollongong flags fluttered in the breeze on that beautiful summer day last December.

The Illawarra community remembered with pride the lessons of the struggle of the Port Kembla wharfies in refusing to load 'pig iron' bound for Japan. The Plaque was erected and unveiled so that the wider community is aware of our history and in particular the history of the working people in Port Kembla.



Her Excellency Madam Fu Ying, the Chinese Ambassador to Australia, at the unveiling of the plaque