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Continued

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The Illawarra Trades and Labour Council in Depression, Recovery and War, 1926–45 Continued

Abstract
The usefulness of the unions’ solidarity which had for so long been advocated was tested in early 1936 when what has become known as the Annabel Dispute was triggered. The dispute was over excessive overtime which BHP/AI&S had required men in the 36’ mill to work for many months. On the 24th January the men decided to refuse to work overtime, as their requests for the Company to consider their complaints had been ignored. The delegate who conveyed the message that the men would not work past the eight and three quarter hours required by the Award was fired, and the other mill hands joined him, saying they would work again only if Norman Annabel was re-instated. A week later a stop-work meeting at the Globe Theatre Wollongong, attended by sixteen or seventeen hundred workers decided not to return to work until Annabel was reinstated in his former position in the mill, and overtime was eliminated from the 36’ mill. The management absolutely refused to discuss these matters. At the subsequent conference held of all unions with members employed by the Company, a unanimous decision that all unionists would cease work in support of Annabel was reached. It took until 3rd April 1936 for the dispute to be resolved, but the FIA was de-registered in the process and Norman Annabel did not achieve a return to the 36’ mill.1

Overtime was reduced, however, and in addition, the combined unions’ committee, which co-ordinated the strike, showed workers union and non-union members alike, the value of such collective action as the Illawarra Trades and Labour Council made possible. In 1962 when the Miners’ Federation opened a new building, Labour Council conventional wisdom had it that the Strike Committee for the Annabel dispute had played the role of
reforming the Labour Council and, to the extent that the 1936 Annabel dispute gave heart and first experience of collective endeavour to many of those involved, this was partly true, for union membership grew in the wake of the Annabel strike, especially that of the FIA and the AEU, and gave increasing strength to the Illawarra Trades and Labour Council.

The T&L Council did not forget its traditional concerns about social needs of its members because its industrial arm felt stronger. The Labour Council, along with the South Coast Housing Committee, called a meeting in 1937 so that public discussion could be held on the severe shortage of housing which still existed. The opinion that the Government should build cheap workmen’s homes was a popular one, as was the view that BHP/Al&$ ‘... showed greater interest in providing elaborate housing for machinery than for human beings’. Since the Company had declared definitely that it would never countenance financial assistance to its employees, and that it was not company policy to undertake housing schemes this was literally true. The Illawarra Labour Council, the local government of the district and the South Coast Housing Committee all believed that BHP/Al&$ had some responsibility to house workers and on this basis the Labour Council built some unity with new friends, the municipal councils. Relations were good enough for the Labour Council to intercede successfully on behalf of squatters when the municipalities took objection to rough shelters being erected on their land. The coalition of unions, local government and the Housing Committee eventually moved the State Government in July 1938 to commence building some workers’ housing.

The result became known as Spoonerville after the Minister for Local Government, and was a travesty which raised the ire and disgust of many, including Rev. Hobbin who called it ‘a monument to socially biased minds’. Spoonerville certainly did nothing to lift the standard of housing in the district, but the Illawarra Labour Council’s persistent support for working class issues, whether workers’ grievances about harsh working conditions in the steel industry and programmes of relief work for the unemployed or the uncertainty of what employment there was, or the need to provide decent housing for thousands of workers in the district, did bring esteem and respect to both the Council and its member unions. The work of the Illawarra Trades and Labour Council was understood in the community because what it did touched on hardships which were part and parcel of the community’s life.

This community respect translated into community support for the action of the Port Kembla Branch of the Waterside Workers’
Federation when in 1935 it placed bans on the loading of the Dalfram, a ship destined for Kobe, Japan, with 7,000 tons of pig iron. This cargo was to have been the first instalment of 23,000 tons that B.H.P. had agreed to supply to Japanese interests. The Waterside Workers received immediate support from the Illawarra Trades and Labour Council and South Coast trade unions, including the FIA, the FEDFA and the AWU.7 The Waterside Workers’ Federation members believed the sale of pig iron to Japan would allow Japan to manufacture munitions which would eventually be used in a war against Australia.

Steve Best, who combined secretaryship of the Labour Council with that of the Combined Disputes Committee wrote in confident tones to all unions at the height of the struggle. That the Disputes Committee felt in firm control of the strike was not without foundation. BHP had sacked, some two weeks earlier, four thousand workers, claiming that the waterfront strike had forced them to do so. Still no worker broke the ban on the Dalfram although, by applying for a licence under the Transport Workers’ Act they could have done so legally. The Disputes Committee instructed that a stopwork meeting of all unionists was to take place if any attempt was made to load the Dalfram.8

Further cause for confidence was the support lent by the Executive of the ACTU, which had been consulted by the WWF. The confidence in local solidarity was high enough for the Port Kembla Branch of the Waterside Workers’ Federation, and the Disputes Committee, to disregard the apprehension of the influential J. Healy, then General Secretary of the WWF. Jim Healy was less than enthusiastic about the pig-iron dispute because of fears he held that the Federation would be destroyed again, as it had been in 1928, by the provisions of the Transport Workers’ Act, which wharf labourers called the Dog Collar Act.9

A visit by Mr R.G. Menzies, Federal Attorney-General, to meet the combined unions committee was arranged to settle the dispute. ‘The welcome’ which the Disputes Committee arranged was described in the local press as one Mr Menzies would not readily forget.10 In any event, the Dalfram dispute became inextricably interwoven into Mr Menzies’ life for from that time he was known as ‘Pig-Iron Bob’ to all Australians.

Mr Menzies insisted that the Government must remain in command of foreign policy, and promised that if the Dalfram was loaded, the Government would reconsider its exporting of pig-iron, as well as the licensing provisions of the Transport Workers Act. Eventually, these undertakings were accepted under pressure from the increasing expenses and hardship to workers brought about by the closure of the B.H.P. works.11 The Dalfram
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was loaded on 21 January 1939. Though the waterside workers lost the dispute to that extent, their actions focussed Australian attention on foreign policy and showed Wollongong workers that unions could take political action which made impact. The Port Kembla wharf labourers expressed fears which many Australians held. Though they did not lead the movement against Fascism, nor for peace, their pig-iron dispute struck a chord of growing concern among Australians as the turn of international events began to be of greater moment in Australia. The outbreak of World War II later in 1939, the continuing push southward by Japanese forces and the subsequent attack on Australia by Japan confirmed the WWF in their belief that they had been correct in their analysis of the 1938–39 political situation and in their actions in trying to stop the export of pig-iron.

The Illawarra Trades and Labour Council had managed to unite not only the unions behind the waterside workers. People joined street processions organised by the Illawarra Trades and Labour Council and the banners linked the wharf labourers’ actions to long-felt needs. The banners read ‘Peace and Work’, ‘Homes not War’, ‘Refuse to Provide Arms to Aggressor Nations’. The Labour Council in its support of the WWF had stressed the connection between the concerns of organised workers and those of their whole community. It was able to draw support when it organised a conference of all union and Labor organisations to oppose the two Bills which the Menzies Government introduced into Parliament in June 1939. The National Register Bill and the Supply and Development Bill were objected to by the trade union movement because it was claimed together they could be used to conscript workers for military service. Anxiety that military conscription was the real intent of the Bills and concern that civil liberties were being undermined caused widespread opposition to them and the refusal of many workers to register under the National Registration Act. The ACTU decided to boycott the National Register, although it withdrew the boycott shortly afterwards when certain assurances were given by the Prime Minister that there was no ‘intention … to use any of its powers to set aside or impair … awards or industrial agreements … [re] … wages and conditions of employment in Government or private factories, for reasons of defence’. The Illawarra Trades and Labour Council conference branded the Bills ‘a vicious measure’ and resolved to direct every effort to compelling the Menzies Government to withdraw the Bills. Failing that, it was decided, workers should boycott the Register and fail to fill in the prescribed forms. By the end of July, however, the ACTU had lifted its boycott, but promised ‘not to rest’ until
due safeguards were implemented. By September just after the declaration of war in Europe, Labor Party amendments to the Bills had provided these safeguards and trade union objections ceased.

But the Illawarra Trades and Labour Council conference on the National Register added another item to its agenda when, on 15 June 1939, the Federal Government gazetted regulations giving it power to declare any organisation illegal, and to confiscate its property. The Communist Party was declared illegal, and the gazetted regulations had therefore direct effects on many of the Illawarra’s best known and respected union and unemployed leaders. The Ironworkers, Miners and Waterside Workers Unions all had leaders and rank and file members who were Communists. The Illawarra Trades and Labour Council’s conference protested at the decision to declare the CPA an unlawful organisation, saying that it was an attack on all working class organisation. The Illawarra Labour Council claimed that the Menzies government fought Fascism with words only, but with deeds such as this, was trying to smash the unions and the Labour movement in readiness for the establishment of Fascism in Australia. In this anxiety that the Menzies government might be pro-Fascist the Illawarra Labour Council was but part of a large section of trade union, Labour and intellectual opinion which initially had grave reservations about the war. Out of this anxiety developed the notion of the ‘phony war’, the term describing the period when many Australians feared that the Federal Government’s advocacy of appeasement and rapprochement with Germany indicated support for Fascism. It was some time before the Illawarra Trades and Labour Council and other labour organisations gave full commitment to the war, and even longer before the ban on the Communist Party was lifted in 1942, by the Curtin Government.

Before then, the Illawarra Trades and Labour Council was to undergo a major change. Steve Best, who had been secretary-organiser of the Illawarra Labour Council since the June 1926 commencement, had died. Through the vicissitudes of the Depression years and the ensuing 1935 re-establishment of the Labour Council as economic recovery began, Steve Best had remained leader of the Labour Council, a leader of the unemployed movement and a leader of the Labor Party. Killed suddenly in 1940 in a car accident as he returned from a Sydney bowling trip, Steve Best’s death brought obituaries from the whole community. His unselfish and often unpaid service to the Labour Council, to the Labor Party and to the unemployed was noted, as was his victimisation at Hoskins Ltd and in the district
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mines because of his work to unionise those he worked with. Pat McHenry, the Communist secretary of the Ironworkers Union told mourners:

Since 1935 I have seen a rapid advance in the trade union movement and that progress is due largely to the keenness and enthusiasm of the late Steve Best. In large disputes he was in the forefront of the battle, despite the fact that Council’s funds would be depleted and his salary curtailed.20

At the funeral, five hundred unionists and officers of all South Coast unions and lodges, officers and members of ALP assemblies and branches, branch officers and members of the Communist Party marched in front of the hearse through Crown Street, Wollongong, to the cemetery. A mile of cars and buses followed. Mr W. Davies MLA, aldermen and representatives from business houses and industries attended also. Steve Best was only 41 when he died, and had in effect spent all his adult life as an activist in the labour movement, for the most meagre monetary rewards. Very little record of his life is extant, yet the evidence there is suggests that his life’s work contributed greatly to the development of the consciousness in Illawarra people that unity brought strength.

The subsequent meeting of the Illawarra Trades and Labour Council, before adjourning, called for nominations for the position of secretary. Two weeks later, Mr J. (Jack) Cranston, of the Ironworkers became secretary, thus winning for the Communist Party, the leadership of the Illawarra Trades and Labour Council. At this meeting some delegates proposed the building of a Trades Hall as a fitting monument to Steve Best.21 Though it was then twenty-six years since the first attempts to establish the Illawarra Labour Council, the high hopes for a communal trade union property which had been expressed in 1914 were far from realisable. In the event, the memorial to Steve Best took the form of a sun dial in Rest Park,22 where the mass meetings and fund-raising concerts of waterside workers had been held in the Dalfram dispute.23 The sundial was unveiled on 15 August 1942, by Mr E. Browne, Vice President of the Illawarra Miners, and, as Steve Best had been, President of Corrimal Bowling Club.

Steve Best’s death came just a few days after the ‘phony war’ ended in early May 1940. The end of the ‘phony war’ also ended the miners’ strike of 1940 when miners tried to restore provisions of 1939 which had been eroded by the Arbitration Court. The settlement, spurred by the invasion of France, was devised at meetings between the ACTU, the Miners’ Federation, and State and Federal Governments, included an undertaking
by the mining unions to go to arbitration when in dispute during the war. The IT&LC had given support to the Miners’ Federation when it took direct action to win its 1938 log of claims, and had itself grown stronger as a result. Again in 1940, it supported local miners as part of Labour Council resistance to what they claimed were the Menzies Government’s and big employers’ attacks on the people of Australia.

By the time Steve Best’s memorial was in place in Rest Park, the people of Australia had developed more patriotic enthusiasm for the conduct of the war. There had been a No-Conscription Committee formed in Wollongong by Steve Best, to express the local labour movement’s alarm at the ‘extraordinary powers vested under the National Security Act in the Federal Government’, which sent delegates to a meeting in Sydney of the Congress Against Conscription and For the Defence of Australia in July 1940. This Congress passed a resolution from Illawarra Trades and Labour Council that ‘the friendship of the Soviet Union is needed and must be cultivated if Fascism is to be holed [sic] ...’. The Illawarra Trades and Labour Council policy on international affairs was very close to CPA policy. It supported war if it was against Fascism, but continued the working class struggle against the legislation of a conservative government which seemed to the Council to be bent on implementing excessive control over workers in the guise of war-time security measures.

In September 1940, the Labour Council supported Mr R.F.X. Connor in the Federal election in October that year, against the sitting member Mr H. Lazzarini, the Lang Labor man. Mr Lazzarini had earned the displeasure of the left by voting in June 1940 in favour of the emergency powers which permitted industrial conscription. And the Illawarra Trades and Labour Council was not yet fully committed to the war effort. In his report on Council’s activities for 1940, Jack Cranston, the new secretary said that the Illawarra Labour Council had found its general business so linked up with the general organisation of the workers’ fight against the Conscription measures of the Menzies government that the Conscription Committee had collapsed altogether. Effectively the Labour Council’s chief work for 1940 had been an anti-Menzies electoral campaign, because the Menzies Government and ‘the big employers ... are making war an excuse for a general attack on the people of Australia’. The internal criticism of the Menzies leadership in the Coalition Liberal/Country Party Government, and the electorate’s distaste for his past support for appeasement, led ultimately after R.G. Menzies’ resignation, and A. Fadden’s Prime Ministership of ‘40 days and 40 nights’ to the Labor Party, under John Curtin,
taking Federal office on 3 October 1941. John Curtin’s Labor Government was welcomed by Communists and Conservatives alike because the war had reached a critical situation. France had fallen to Hitler’s army, Germany had invaded Russia on Midsummer’s Day, and Great Britain was under severe attack from the German Air Force. Within days of Labor taking Federal office, the Illawarra Trades and Labour Council held a special meeting for which the sole agenda item was a proposal submitted by two Communist members of Council, J. Cranston and W. Frame. The need to crush Fascism to protect the working class, to condemn employers who put profits before patriotism, to wholeheartedly support the Anglo-Soviet Pact and to ensure that the bastion against Nazi domination of the world, Soviet Russia, was assisted to victory, were all endorsed. ‘All the resources in the power of the Illawarra Trades and Labour Council [would be available] for any economic or military steps … to strike blows against the Nazis’. It is clear the Labour Council was now prepared to fight the war, for it promised not to make unreasonable demands on the government, but to support it in steps necessary to remove all obstructions preventing a total war effort.

Chapter 6. Winning the Peace

The ‘war against Fascism’ brought an enthusiastic response after late 1941 even from unionists who had, throughout 1940 and the first half of 1941, taken the opportunities presented by high employment and wartime regulations to ameliorate their conditions. National Security Regulations allowed the Manpower Authorities to over-rule suspensions by employers of union officials, and the high demand for steel and steel manufactures made BHP/AIS anxious to keep production going. Working days lost in Australia through strike action in 1940 and 1941 were the highest (other than 1938, the year of the long strike which won miners the greatest reforms ever) since the 1929–30 Northern Mines lock out. The Illawarra Trades and Labour Council helped co-ordinate support for employees of the Commonwealth Rolling Mills at Port Kembla when they went on strike for a month in March 1940, over an interim award. Again in March, ironworkers in the AIS spun pipe division went on strike over grievances which included a complaint that some workers had to spend seven hours without a meal, that they had inadequate change rooms and toilet facilities, and needed somewhere out of the heat, dust, and noise of the mill to eat their meals. But from the entry of Germany on to Russian soil, all left wing labour
organisations, especially those with Communist influence, worked hard to minimise strikes and to promote the war effort. Calls to avoid stoppages and boost production were not regarded as abandonment of old struggles but as defending socialism.

The ACTU also adopted a co-operative attitude to the Curtin Government, quite unlike the grudging responses which the Menzies Government had evoked. The ACTU now sought to be represented on public bodies and wartime authorities, and became almost integrated with the machinery of the State at War. For its part, the Curtin Government adopted the theme that justice for workers could not be won unless victory in the war was first achieved. The Curtin Government’s proposals appealed to workers of all political beliefs with its inviting vision of a re-ordered post-war Australian society and its firm resolve to win the war. The entry of Japan into the war only served to strengthen the resolve of unions. The ACTU’s Executive drew up a wartime policy which required close consultation between Government and unions to develop policies on control of stoppages and improvement in Arbitration, to build workshop involvement in factory management, to protect living standards by wage adjustment and price control, and to employ women at male rates, with guarantees of male workers’ access to jobs after the war. Such a policy had the advantages for the ACTU of increasing its strength and its stature.

Nor was the Illawarra Trades and Labour Council unmindful of the opportunities to increase its strength. Unions were encouraged to affiliate. Many, like the Heavy Industries Clerical Officers’ Association, a Wollongong affiliate of the Federated Clerks’ Union, brought previously unorganised workers into the Labour Council fold. The Heavy Industries Clerks had been formed in June 1942 and affiliated with the Illawarra Trades and Labour Council in August 1942. The Labour Council also assiduously maintained relations with other provincial councils, especially Newcastle, and they mutually exchanged speakers for festivals such as May Day. By 1944, the Illawarra Trades and Labour Council had thirty unions affiliated, paying affiliation fees for 10,494 members.

The Illawarra Trades and Labour Council organised publicity for Liberty loans and raised money for Wollongong Hospital and wartime charities like the Australian Comforts Fund. In October 1943, the Volunteer Defence Corps appealed to the Illawarra Trades and Labour Council for help in getting personnel for the Heavy Industries Battalion, and was promised assistance on the grounds that service in the V.D.C. released troops to fight in the drive against ‘Japanese Fascists’.
Attention of Australians was now turned more closely on the home front. In 1943 the Red Army had won a decisive victory at Stalingrad and, in August 1943, Labor had been confirmed in office, and all major Australian Army units had been brought into the war against the Japanese. Australians felt that the threat of imminent invasion by the Japanese had been repelled.43

The ACTU came into conflict with the Labor Government over the unions’ wish to claim some of the rewards for hard work and wage sacrifices made in the war effort. The Labor Treasurer, Mr Chifley, had proposed instead the fixing of wages at the level pertaining in March 1943, in order to avoid post-war inflation. Mr Chifley argued that, as Minister for Post-War Reconstruction, he had to ensure a healthy economy to provide for the rehabilitation of returned servicemen, expanded social services and welfare provisions, and adequate housing, health, welfare and education services.44 Many unionists were disillusioned and began by old methods to win better working conditions and wages. In 1945, the percentage increase in working days lost in industrial disputes since 1943 was 135 per cent.45

Between 1943 and 1945 the number of disputes brought to the Illawarra Trades and Labour Council increased markedly. The Illawarra Metal Trades Group functioned within the Council to effectively manage disputes as did the Building Trades Group. In December 1944, a special meeting of Council sympathetically heard Mr F. Lowden, President, Mr E.R. Browne, Vice-President, and Mr R. Dixon of the Miners, who requested support from the Illawarra Trades and Labour Council in their dispute with the Federal Government over the reduction of holidays from 16 to 10 days and for other more far-reaching proposals of the Miners’ Federation which led ultimately to the setting up of the Joint Coal Board. In spite of the Federal Labor Government’s claim that a drop in coal production would not only damage the war effort, but would also put at some risk the return of a Labor Government, the Illawarra Trades and Labour Council resolved:

This Council views with concern the continued refusal of the Labor Government to face up to the real causes of declining production in the coal-mining industry. We advise the Government of our complete unity with the Miners in support of their proposals to put the industry on such an organised basis that it can carry the strain of extra war production without further hardship and injustice to workers in the industry.46

The Labour Council then sweetened this strong stand with an assurance that
Australian reaction [sic] ... [would not be permitted] ... to isolate the Miners, split the Labour movement, bring down a Labor Government and seize office for the vital post-war period.47

In this way, as the war moved towards its last days, the Illawarra Trades and Labour Council stood loyally by the union which had been instrumental in its creation and the source of much of its financial and human resources.

A few months later, peace was won in Europe, followed on 2 September by the formal Japanese surrender after atom bombs had been dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki on 6 August. On 22 September a strike began in the Coke Ovens at BHP/AIS which eventually involved 13,000 steelworkers representing fifteen trade unions. The strike lasted until 6th January 1946, and became known as the Parker Dispute, after Don Parker, an Ironworkers’ shop delegate at AI&S. Mr Parker was ordered three times in a week to fill a vacancy on the coke oven lids and three times refused to do so. Don Parker refused because it was ‘custom and practice’ to fill such a vacancy from the ranks of the most recently employed48 and such ‘custom and practice’ represented seniority practices which had not been lightly established. When Don Parker was dismissed, the workers in the coke oven section struck in protest. The Company, deliberately to escalate the dispute it seemed to many unionists, put non-union labour on the coke oven section, extending the dispute eventually to the plant’s entire workforce of 6,000.49

Attempts to negotiate with the Company to solve the matter were refused by the Company on the grounds that the FIA was de-registered in New South Wales (as it was, due to another matter). Although the Full Bench of the Industrial Commission later condemned the company’s attitude, BHP/AIS refused still to negotiate, even with Illawarra Trades and Labour Council Disputes Committee. The dispute quickly escalated, with miners being laid off in the Illawarra, and by 3 November, the closure of the whole Newcastle Steelworks plant. The dispute had spread quickly because the Company had used non-union labour to replace men on strike and had provocatively disregarded seniority rights when laying off men. Seven thousand Newcastle men joined the Illawarra six thousand.50

The Illawarra Trades and Labour Council’s practice of working closely with Newcastle Trades Hall Council was now extended to set up a Central Strike Committee, with representatives from the Illawarra and Newcastle Disputes Committees, and from the unions involved. Support from miners, seamen and other ironworkers in New South Wales and Victoria was forthcoming,
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and, in early January, the Full Bench of the Industrial Commission ordered AIS to re-instate Parker. A later hearing re-registered the FIA.51

There had been a struggle for authority over the Parker dispute between the New South Wales Labour Council and the Illawarra and Newcastle Councils. A contemporary FIA official of Port Kembla FIA Branch said ‘the State Labour Council tried the squash the locals out’52 but ‘the locals’ were determined in this dispute because they firmly believed that there was a deliberate attempt by BHP to smash unionism in the steel industry. Their own local interests were threatened and the Illawarra workers felt confident that their mutual interests with Newcastle could give them strength to win the fight. The Labour Council of New South Wales was believed to be unreliable in its support of Illawarra industrial disputes, and concerned with maintaining their own authority in the labour movement structure.53

It was not merely the unionists who felt united in this dispute. The steel and coal towns’ shared determination to help each other went beyond the union organisations, for the Parker dispute engendered wide community support and involvement in both Newcastle and Wollongong throughout the fifteen weeks.

In the Illawarra district the Labour Council and the striking or laid-off unionists drew on the organisational skills developed in the Unemployed Workers Movement once again. Twenty-one Area Committees were set up to organise fishing, rabbitting, wood collecting and bulk purchase of staple foodstuffs for the strikers and their families. Toys were made so that no child would have a Christmas without a gift, and entertainment by Actors’ Equity members was arranged. All along the coastal strip of the Illawarra the Area Committees kept the strikers and their families fed and busy.54

This huge strike, at the close of the year in which the war ended, symbolises in a clear, dramatic way the change from wartime relations between workers and industry. But it also showed Illawarra unionists that the unity they had so patiently and persistently worked for in peace and in war, in work and out of work and in the Labour Council and out of it, was a productive ethos to be guided by. One retired ironworker expressed the importance of the victory for him and his colleagues in the unions:

You see we got better at it; with Annabel we won but he didn’t get his own job back. With Parker we won and he did get his own job back.55

Like the ironworker, the IT&LC felt strong after the 1945 Steel Strike and increasingly so as the post-war years unfolded.
Conclusion

The Illawarra Trades and Labour Council was, in the main, part of the Labourist tradition which subscribed to belief in strong unionism, a White Australia, compulsory arbitration and support for the Labor Party which could, and would when in office, manage the capitalist state to the advantage of workers. The IT&LC displayed at times, however, a willingness to differ from the mainstream of Australian union policy. The Council’s departures from the broader union movement’s policies arose partly out of its loyalties to the Miners’ Federation which had instigated its formation and sustained it with officers and funding. Local communists had won popularity and respect during, the Depression. They demonstrated their belief that all workers had common interests which could be protected by united action, by taking part in all the humanitarian and civil rights campaigns of the period. This gave them the necessary authority later, to lead Illawarra unionists to adopt policy different from that of the ACTU.

It was those policies of the IT&LC which differed from the ACTU and adopted in response to the local political and social peculiarities which produced its special significance as a local organisation. The IT&LC departed from the policies of its senior organisations, the Labour Council of New South Wales and the ACTU chiefly in matters pertaining to the mining and steelmaking industries on which the majority of Illawarra workers relied for employment.

The IT&LC met the typical problems inherent in amalgamation of unions of unequal size, influence and resources. The embryonic state of many of the Illawarra unions caused their ability to pay affiliation fees to be unreliable, creating in turn difficulties for the IT&LC in maintaining its functions whenever its affiliates’ membership was reduced by unemployment.

The anti-isolationists policies expressed by the IT&LC support for the Spanish Relief Committee which gave moral and material aid to those fighting Fascism in the Spanish Civil War were not developed by the members of the IT&LC. The Labour Council endorsed the policies adopted by the New South Wales Labour Council and the ACTU focussing them on the two young Wollongong men who had gone to fight in the International Brigade.

The ACTU had called for a stop to export of metals to Japan and cancellation of its Australian iron ore mining leases at the 1937 Congress. The need to protect a White Australia gave an edge to the union movement’s fears that Japanese attacks on China threatened world peace. The WWF, first in Sydney and
then in other Australian ports, had refused to load war materials early in 1938. When the Port Kembla waterside workers banned the loading of the *Dalfram* they acted in accord with the policy of the ACTU which eventually led the settlement moves. The workers of the Illawarra by their wholehearted support for the Port Kembla waterside workers focused national attention on the issue of selling war material to a potential aggressor.

The National Registration Act of 1939 was opposed by all levels of the organised union movement until amendments had been made which gave safeguards against its use for conscription. Illawarra opposition to this and to the proscription of the CPA was expressed by participation in the forums of the New South Wales Labour Council. The IT&LC organised the representation of all Illawarra unions at the Sydney Congress Against Concription and For the Defence of Australia.

Until John Curtin took office in October 1941 Australian unions remained critical of the war effort claiming the Menzies Government was using war as an excuse to oppress workers. But the advent of a Labor Government and the critical situation which the war had reached allowed the ACTU and its affiliates to argue that a victory in the war and the justice for workers promised by Labor in office were both attainable and inseparable. In accord, the IT&LC committed itself to the war effort.

Illawarra members of the Communist Party were respected leaders of the Illawarra Trades and Labour Council. Their successful united front with the Labor Party in supporting local social and industrial struggles gave them authority in the district to lead the Illawarra union movement through the change in CPA policy from opposition to wholehearted support for the war effort.

The IT&LC which turned its attention to the war effort was made up of the same people who had led the campaigns to improve housing, protect civil liberties end to win trade union rates for relief work given to the unemployed. It did not discard its interest in social questions when it took up the fight for victory in the war. The IT&LC had been formed and led by miners who had been able to draw on the Illawarra mining communities’ solidarity and organising experience forged in workers’ struggles on the South Coast since 1879. So the Labour Council agreed when the Miners’ Federation Southern District officials asked for support in their opposition to the Federal Labor Government when it introduced the proposals of the Coal Industry Act in 1944 as a prelude to its plans for post war reconstruction. In so doing, the IT&LC was outside the ACTU’s policy of co-operation with the government in return for workers’ representation on
public bodies and wartime authorities. The IT&LC adopted its own policy.

The concentration of employment in two main industries, the AIS steelworks and coal mining meant that industrial disputes affecting these industries affected a large component of the workforce. Therefore the leadership of the IT&LC, when it led successful strikes, gained favour with a large portion of the district population and brought the Labour Council commensurate approval. Such successes identified it in peoples’ minds as a source of power available to them. The IT&LC in this way laid down the foundation for its claim that its proper role is to be active in all community issues in the Illawarra, not merely those of an industrial nature.

Notes

4. Richardson, The Bitter Years, p. 140.
5. ibid.
6. ibid.
8. File T31/7, Illawarra Trades and Labour Council records, Butlin Archives of Business and Labour ANU, Correspondence, 6 January 1938 [sic] [1939].
11. AEU Souvenir, p. 229.
13. AEU Souvenir, p. 237.
15. AEU Souvenir, p. 238.
16. L. Boardman (former FIA and ITLC official) and W. McDougal (veteran member and official CPA), interviews, 23 February 1984 & 10 November 1983 respectively.
19. Illawarra Mercury, 31 May 1940.
20. ibid.
21. ibid, 14 June 1940.
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23 Olive Howe (CPA activist and daughter of activist), interview, 24 June 1983.
25 *Illawarra Mercury*, 10 May 1940.
26 File T31/7, Illawarra Trades and Labour Council records, Butlin Archives of Business and Labour ANU.
27 *Illawarra Mercury*, 10 May 1940.
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