

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

Volume 8
Issue 1 *Illawarra Unity*

Article 9

December 2008

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Recommended Citation

Roland, Betty, "Workers - Beware!" [Play], *Illawarra Unity - Journal of the Illawarra Branch of the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History*, 8(1), 2008, 80-85.

Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/unity/vol8/iss1/9>

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"Workers - Beware!" [Play]

Abstract

Dramatisation of an encounter between a BHP coal manager, a ship owner and waterside workers.

Cover Page Footnote

This play was originally published in the Communist Review, January 1939. Dramatis personae include a representative of BHP, King Coal, a shipowner, a worker, a seaman and a waterside worker.

“WORKERS—BEWARE!”

Betty Roland

This play was originally published in the *Communist Review*,
January 1939, 39–42.

Dramatis Personae: B.H.P. King Coal. Shipowner. Worker.
Seaman. Waterside Worker.

[B.H.P., a fat and prosperous looking individual, takes the stage. He strikes himself on the chest and recites, with great ferocity:]

B.H.P. I'm B.H.P., the B.H.P.,
And so, you see,
It's best to be
Good friends with me.
For if you're not,
I'll make it hot
And dam' soon have
You on the spot!

[Worker strolls up to him.]

Work: Oh yea-ah? Well, I'm the chap from Lysaghts, see? And what the hell do you mean by giving two of my mates the sack just because they've got the guts to tell you a few home truths about yourself?

B.H.P.: What do you think I mean? I won't have these red-raggers, these bolsheviks, these trade union busy-bodies poking their nose into my affairs.

Work: You won't, eh? Well, poke your nose into this: we're behind those blokes, every one of us, and you don't get us back to work until they come too.

[He turns and begins to go off, B.H.P. following, shouting after him.]

B.H.P.: How dare you talk to me like that? You bounder, you vulgarian, you common, low-born thug!

Work: [turning round] And another thing, don't you start any funny business with that new award you're cooking up in Broken Hill. I've got my eye on you, don't forget.

B.H.P.: And I'll have the Arbitration Court on you. Laugh that one off.

[Worker gives a hearty raspberry before he hastily goes.]

B.H.P.: [in a fury] Strike would they? Interrupt production! Reduce my profits? Oh, for a Hitler! Oh, for a Mussolini even! Oh, for a good sound Fascist government!

[While he is ranting round the stage, KING COAL comes in. He wears a paper crown and a purple robe but looks as though he has just come out worst in a fight.]

K.C.: Hello, Prop., old boy, what's the matter?

B.H.P.: What's the matter? Did you bear what that rude fellow just said to me?

K.C.: Said to you! Take a look at what some of them have done to me.

B.H.P.: Yes, you do look a bit the wore for wear.

K.C.: My boy, you don't know what strikes mean. You've only got one subsidiary workshop out, I've had every mine in the Commonwealth closed. Just you wait till you have that sort of thing to put up with. Oh, what a headache!

[He recites in a mournful voice:]

Old King Coal, is a poor old soul,
With profits going up the pole.
That fellow Orr, makes me feel sore,
I'd like to sock him in the jaw.

B.H.P.: Well, it might have been worse, they're back at work and you can always depend on the Arbitration Court to do its best for you.

K.C.: Don't you believe it. I'm not going to be able to get away with much this time. They're waking up, we can't fool the workers like we used to.

B.H.P.: It's 'scandalous! Outrageous!' The way they let those agitators poison their minds against us. Only in a democratic country are such things possible.

K.C.: Democracy!' Oh, how I hate that word.

[SHIPOWNER strolls in. He is dressed in a natty yachting suit.]

Ship: Hello, old pots, what the deuce is biting you? I say, really, you look hot and bothered, dontcherknow?

B.H.P.: You'd get hot and bothered, Shipowner, if you had to put up with what we have to.

K.C.: With the way the miners are going on a man can't call his coal his own.

Ship: Ah, what you need, my dear old beans, is a little sympathetic legislation.

K.C.: What do you mean?

Ship: Why, you perfectly priceless old peach, do you really mean you don't get me? Here, take a look at this.

[He pulls a rope which he holds in his hand and a WATERSIDE WORKER is dragged in with rope fastened to collar round his neck; Shipowner pulls a second rope and a SEAMAN appears in the same manner.]

Ship: My two most humble and obedient servants, Waterside Worker and Seaman. [He indicates each with a wave of hand.] Nicely on the string, what?

[Both men struggle and try to loosen "dog-collars", much to the amusement of the others]

B.H.P.: Marvellous!

K.C.: The very thing. Why have I never done it?

Ship: Never too late to mend, old fruit.

B.H.P.: How did you do it?

Ship: Oh, influence, my dear boy, influence. It took a little time, a little, what you might term—argument but once I got the government behind me, then the rest was easy.

B.H.P.: We must make a note of this.

K.C.: Yes, we must indeed.

Ship: Look, I'll give you just a little illustration of the way it works.

[He goes up to Waterside Worker.]

Ship: Well, go on, get busy. Why aren't you loading those tin clippings for Japan?

W.W.: Because they're war materials. I'm not going to help those lousey Japs make war on innocent women and children.

Ship: You're not! And since when have you had any say in what you're going to do? Another word from you and I'll cancel your license and you won't get another job if you go down on your knees for it.

W.W.: I'm not going to load that tin.

Ship: You're going to do as I tell you.

W.W.: I'll be hanged if I am.

[Shipowner tightens his grip on "dag-collar" so that he half strangles the Watersider.]

Ship: You'll be hanged if you don't. I'll tighten up this "dog-collar" act till you can hardly breathe—and that goes for your wife and children, too. You'll all starve together.

[He gives the collar a vicious jerk.]

Ship: Now, do as I tell you and look sharp about it.

W.W.: [To Seaman] Can't you do anything to help me?

Sea: What can I do? I'm just as helpless as you are.

[Watersider is gradually forced onto his knees. B.H.P. and King

Coal cheer Shipowner on and slap him on the back.]

B.H.P.: Atta boy! Give him the works.

K.C.: What an inspiration! What a grand example!

[Shipowner releases his grip on Watersider and gives him a shove.]

Ship: Now, get going on that job and look sharp about it.

W.W.: You wait, you cow. I'll remember this.

Ship: You remember that dog-collar's round your neck and I can force you into doing what I want.

[He makes a threatening move towards Water:sider, who dodges behind B.H.P. and King Coal, pokes his head out and gives a loud and derisive "bow-wow-wow" ending up with a vicious "G-r-r-r!" Shipowner goes for him and he beats a hasty retreat.]

B.H.P.: Dear me! .The impertinence!

K.C.: The cheek of the working class!

Ship: Don't you worry about him. He can only bark.

B.H.P.: My dear boy, I am full of admiration.

K.C.: I am almost moved to tears.

Ship: Well, take a leaf out of my book.. Now's your chance, B.H.P. You've got a new agreement being fixed up, slip in a little clause about "national emergency," and you'll soon have things like you want them.

K.C.: [tearfully] But what about me?

Ship: We'll find a way to fix you up and all the other key industries, too. We boys have got to stick together these hard times.

K.C.: Too right, we have.

All: All for each and each for all!

[They link hands and begin to sing, dancing round in a circle.]

"For the more we stick together, together, together,

The more we stick together the wealthier we'll be!
For your friends are my friends and my ends suit your
ends,
So, the more we stick together, the wealthier we'll be."

[They go off arm-in-arm and still singing. Seaman and Watersider are left and come forward to address audience.]

W.W.: Comrades, fellow-workers, you have seen what they can do to me.

Sea: They can do the same to me. I am also at their mercy.

W.W.: We are faced with victimisation, loss of licenses, unemployment, if we raise our hands against the boss.

Sea: I can be forced to scab on the Waterside Workers; I can be sent to gaol; I can be fined and fired if I refuse to carry out instructions, no matter how unjust.

W.W.: The liberties that years of constant struggle won for us are lost.

Sea: We are in the worst position of any set of workers in Australia.

W.W.: Help us in our fight to free ourselves.

Sea: Help us to get this collar off our necks.

Both: Help Us To Get It Off Before It Goes On You!