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# The Illawarra Trades and Labour Council in depression, recovery, and war, 1926-1945

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THE ILLAWARRA TRADES AND LABOUR COUNCIL  
IN DEPRESSION, RECOVERY, AND WAR, 1926-1945

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the award of the degree of

Bachelor of Arts (Honours)

from

The University of Wollongong

by

Shirley Nixon

Department of History

1984

This is to certify that the following work has not been previously submitted to any other University. Except for references acknowledged in footnotes, the work is wholly my own.

(Shirley Nixon)

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ABBREVIATIONS

A.C.T.U.	Australian Council of Trade Unions
A.I.S.	Australian Iron and Steel
A.L.P.	Australian Labor Party*
A.N.U.	Australian National University
A.W.U.	Australian Workers Union
B.H.P.	Broken Hill Proprietary Co. Ltd
B.H.P./A.I.S.	Broken Hill Pty Co. Ltd./Australian Iron and Steel
C.P.A.	Communist Party of Australia
E.R.& S	Electrolytic Refining and Smelting Co. Ltd
F.E.D.F.A.	Federated Engine Drivers and Firemen's Association
F.I.A.	Federated Ironworkers' Association
G.N.P.	Gross National Product
I.L.C.	Illawarra Labor Council*
I.T.& L.C.	Illawarra Trades and Labour Council*
I.W.W.	Industrial Workers of the World
M.A.W.A.F.	Movement Against War and Fascism
M.M.M.	Militant Minority Movement
N.S.W.L.C.	New South Wales Labor Council*
U.W.M.	Unemployed Workers Movement
W.W.F.	Waterside Workers' Federation

\* 'Labor' is the spelling used by some organisations of the labour movement, notably the A.L.P.

A NOTE ON SOURCES

The surviving records of the Illawarra Trades and Labour Council for the years before 1943 are sparse indeed, consisting of one small file in the Australian National University archives. The records of the Southern District Miners' Federation offices are also missing for much of the same period. This almost complete lacuna in the records of the major union in the Council and in those of the Council itself is disappointing, and has meant working without a valuable source. Attempts were made in 1963 to have the Labour Council's records deposited in the Archives of the A.N.U. However they have simply disappeared. Considerable reliance on oral evidence has therefore been necessary.

The difficulties of collecting oral evidence concerning events of fifty years ago, and the uncertainties about its accuracy, are well known. For this thesis the problem has been unavoidable, but all such evidence used herein has been subjected to rigorous cross-checking.

Considerable use has also been made of the reports of labour movement activities in two local newspapers, The South Coast Times and The Illawarra Mercury, both of which regularly reported in some detail the activities of the labour movement.



ABSTRACT

The Illawarra Trades and Labour Council, now known as the South Coast Labour Council, is a significant organisation in the social fabric of the Illawarra district. It is a body which does not confine itself to the protection of workers' wages and conditions as union organisations traditionally do. It also takes an active role in community debates about the social and political issues which arise, and is an avenue through which many local people seek to have perceived injustices corrected. This thesis is, in part, an attempt to discover the origins of this socially comprehensive role which the Labour Council adopts and which the community, by and large, expects of it.

This thesis attempts to show how the structures of the Australian trade union movement and the issues which concerned it were dealt with in the specific conditions of the Illawarra in the period 1926-45. It examines the economic conditions which provided the impetus to the formation of the I.T. & L.C., as well as the political motives of those who worked to bring it about.

Chapter One traces the source of workers' desire to organise, and the way in which compulsory arbitration expedited existing moves of workers towards consolidation in the formation of unions and councils of unions. The importance of the connection between the trade unions and their political party in establishing labour movement principles is noted, as is the brief manifestation of the first Illawarra Labour Council.

The foundation in 1926 of the I.T.& L.C. in response to the prospects of increased employment in the steel industry about to be established at Port Kembla, and the paradox of it having, in the event, increased not reduced unemployment in the Illawarra is demonstrated in Chapter Two. In Chapter Three the difficulties which constrained the Labour Council and forced its discontinuation in 1931 are analysed. How social problems of the district, the methods used by the people who worked to counter the unsympathetic official attitudes to the problems of the unemployed, and the influence of the Communist Party's organisations for implementing a United Front of all working class organisations laid the foundation of the I.T.& L.C.'s present day self concept is discussed.

Chapter Four examines the implications for Illawarra workers in the recovery after the Depression, and in the Hoskins steelworks expansion plans. The matters brought before the I.T.& L.C. after its re-establishment in 1935 are shown to be of both industrial and social concern. The influence on the labour movement's activities of the C.P.A.'s United Front policies is demonstrated.

Chapter Five traces the development of industrial workers' confidence as the recovery continued. The direct action which two major unions of the I.T.& L.C. took, and the council's maintenance of interest in social issues is shown. It also deals with the reluctance of the Australian and Illawarra labour movement to accept the contingencies proposed by the conservative

Federal Government to deal with a wartime situation, and its change of heart when the Curtin government came to office in 1941. The strong commitment of unions to the war brought by Germany's invasion of Russia was not merely an I.T.& L.C. phenomenon born of the esteem in which its Communist members were held, but reflected also the labour movement's attitudes including those of the A.C.T.U. The links between the I.T.& L.C. and other local bodies were maintained by the Labour Council's assistance to charities, hospital services and the Volunteer Defence Corps throughout the war. The role played by the successful strike of 1945 when the two steel cities, Wollongong and Newcastle, maintained 13,000 men on strike, and their families, in developing further local confidence in the I.T.& L.C. is explored.

It is concluded that the belief of Illawarra unionists that no effort should be spared to bring about unity to give strength to workers led them so to concern themselves to ameliorate the harshness of the Great Depression that people identified the I.T.& L.C. with actions which had given them dignity and strength. Their support for the I.T.& L.C. gave it dignity and strength in turn, and defined the role of the Illawarra unions' council as not merely to negotiate industrial matters, but to be a vehicle by which social and political protest could be made.

CHAPTER I

THE ILLAWARRA LABOR COUNCIL - FIRST MANIFESTATIONS

The Labor Council of the Illawarra grew, like the unions which joined it, out of the desire shared by workers in industrial societies everywhere to achieve some control over their working conditions. In Australia, unions began to form in the 1830s, and developed more rapidly in the second half of the nineteenth century. The formation of the New South Wales Labour Party in 1891, after the defeat of the Great Maritime Strikes united trade unions, craft and unskilled, under its umbrella. It also placed unions within a broader peoples' movement which had to contend with the necessity for its representatives to win electoral favour with the broader population. In the first years of Labor Party representation in Parliament, the varying expectations in the electorate did not prevent some of the labour programme being implemented. Reforms in the franchise and in conditions in factories, regulations to exclude non-European migrants and the introduction of old age pensions had been won.<sup>1</sup> Labor parliamentarians advocated compulsory arbitration as a means of settling industrial disputes because it was electorally more attractive than strike action. Workers in New South Wales began to recognise the value of compulsory arbitration, preferring it to the Wages Boards of Victoria, because it provided a tribunal which would hear the union case directly, and

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1. R.A. Gollan, 'The Historical Perspective' in P.W.D. Matthews and G.W. Ford (Eds.), Australian Trade Unions, Sun Books, Melbourne, 1968, pp.24-27.

which could be called upon by either party to a dispute for a judgement which was legally binding.<sup>2</sup>

In 1901, the New South Wales Government introduced an Arbitration Act which set up an Arbitration Court to settle disputes brought to it by either unions or employers. The Labor Party and its adherents believed it would be an alternative to strikes and lockouts. In 1904 the scope of arbitration was extended by the introduction of the Commonwealth Conciliation and Arbitration Act, which provided for the compulsory arbitration of all disputes which extended beyond the borders of any one State.<sup>3</sup>

The New South Wales Arbitration Court had to be reformed in 1908 because it became ineffective as a result of challenges to its decisions in higher courts and delays in implementing its decisions. The Federal court, however, enjoyed favour with the unions, largely because of the judgements of its President, Mr Justice Higgins.<sup>4</sup>

By 1910, when the Labor Party came to office in both New South Wales and the Commonwealth, the role of the Labor Party and

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2. Ibid., p.29.

3. J. Hagan, The History of the A.C.T.U., Longman Cheshire, Melbourne, 1981, p.10.

4. R.A. Gollan, 'The Historical Perspective', op.cit., pp.28-9.

the principles it stood for were clear. The set of beliefs which sustained the Labor Party, often referred to as Labourism, included strong unions, compulsory arbitration, a White Australia and the management of a capitalist state, to the advantage of workers, by a Labor Party in power.<sup>5</sup>

There were, in the first years of the twentieth century however, other doctrines arising in the labour movement. Socialists who had been influenced by Marxist ideas opposed arbitration because they believed that workers should not give control of their fate to the State, but should fight as a class, against capitalists and State alike. The teachings of the Industrial Workers of the World also reached Australia from the United States of America in 1907. They argued that the salvation of workers rested in their formation into One Big Union which would eventually take over the State. Coalminers in particular, and the unions of the unskilled workers, found the doctrines of the I.W.W., which advocated direct action, to their liking. The events of the First World War increased the influence of the I.W.W., because they exacerbated the tensions in the Labor Party, by then in power in several States and in the Commonwealth. The vigorous war effort undertaken by the Labor Government included proposals which unionists feared. They included a preparation

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5. J. Hagan, op.cit., p.14.

for conscription and support for the freezing of wages until the war was over. Nevertheless, many unionists took industrial action to increase wages and reduce hours of work, against Labor Party and union advice, and were successful.<sup>6</sup>

The Labor Government's conscription of Australian men to fight in Europe created deep divisions among Australian people. The conscription referenda and the measures of the War Precautions Act confirmed the fears of many workers that their civil rights were under attack. The New South Wales General Strike in 1917, which was beaten by the combined efforts of the State Government and the employers, who recruited 'volunteer' labour, gaoled strike leaders, de-registered unions on strike and set up unions of the 'volunteer' workers led many in the labour movement to believe the I.W.W. claim that the State supported employers' attacks on organised labour.

These attacks on the unions' power brought some acceptance of the ideas of socialists from many unionists who felt that the harsh treatment meted out to striking workers in 1917 demonstrated the need for both industrial and political action. Other unions did not agree, especially the Australian Workers' Union which rejected the I.W.W. and socialist ideas, claiming

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6. Ibid., pp.15-19.



that its own size made it already well on the way to representation of all workers.<sup>7</sup>

The two philosophies, Labourism and the class war, were the inheritance of the Illawarra miners when they made the first attempts to form a labour council.

The origins of the South Coast Labour Council go back to 1914. By 1914 the Depression of the 1890's was left far behind and the value of production per head in Australia was increasing. Labour governments were in office in both New South Wales and in the Commonwealth. The improving economic conditions gave hope to unionists who believed that it was best to rely on direct action to secure gains. Other unionists, probably a majority, who believed their welfare would be safe in the hands of their own political party, sought to 'make the union strong' in order best to put workers' points of views to their parliamentary representatives.<sup>8</sup>

The unions in the Illawarra in 1914 were mostly branches of the State body which covered the industry concerned. Teachers, cokeworkers, meat industry employees, carpenters, bread carters

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7. Ibid.

8. P.W.D. Matthews and G.W. Ford (Eds.), op.cit., p.32.

and wharf labourers had all established union organisations. There were two branches of the Amalgamated Society of Engineers, Municipal Employees, the workers at the Electrolytic Refining and Smelting works at Pt Kembla and the A.R.U. and the F.E.D.F.A. began to organise.<sup>9</sup> Another union branch, the United Labourers, proposed in 1913 an amalgamation with railway workers into a union which had, as one plank of its platform, 'the abolition of the wages system' giving an indication of the socialist ideas which were being discussed in the district.<sup>10</sup>

All these unions, or branches of unions, joined the organisations of the coal miners of the district who had established in 1879 a district organisation of miners' lodges in the face of strong resistance from their employers; the union had survived great difficulties and in 1916 were to be united with all miners in New South Wales as the Australasian Coal and Shale Employees' Union.<sup>11</sup>

Unionism in the Illawarra of 1914, covering as it did a wide

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9. Winifred Mitchell, '1914-1943, The Formative Years', Trade Union Directory, South Coast Trades and Labour Council, 1978, pp.9-10.
10. South Coast Times, 17 January 1913 (Current Jottings).
11. Trade Union Directory, Winifred Mitchell, op.cit., p.9.

range of workers, from teachers and tradesmen to engineers and labourers, was a microcosm of the nation, for the Commonwealth Year Book of 1912 had noted that

Industrial organisation by means of unions now tends to embrace all classes of wage earners.<sup>12</sup>

The time seems to have been propitious for the hopes of those unionists who thought to consolidate their efforts and to form a provincial Labour Council in the Illawarra. The response to a call to a meeting at O'Brien's Hotel in Thirroul in January 1914 drew most of the unions representing the various trades of the district, and it was agreed to form the Illawarra Labor Council.<sup>13</sup> Only 'a couple of unions'<sup>14</sup> had not affiliated with the new district council. This failure to affiliate was not because of any objection to the principle of amalgamation, but because their parent bodies were affiliated with Sydney Trades and Labour Council.

The Illawarra unionists of 1914 accepted the principle of consolidation of their organisations, and were not very concerned whether the consolidation was at the local level or with

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12. Commonwealth Year Book, 1911, p.1039.

13. Illawarra Mercury, January 20, 1914.

14. Ibid.

unionists further afield in the city. In supporting the principle of consolidation, Illawarra unionists were seeking the ideal which has been said to 'haunt trade unionism',<sup>15</sup> that of a united trade union movement. This ideal has its origins in what a great historian of the working class called 'the ethos of mutuality' which he traced to the codes of eighteenth century artisans' guilds and to the earliest formation of friendly societies. The 'ethos of mutuality' arose in response to certain common experiences of the working class, expressed first in the friendly societies' mutual aid systems and later in the trade unions, co-operatives and other labour movements such as political leagues.<sup>16</sup> Australian trade unionists had publicly claimed considerable mutuality of interests since 1879 when, in the Report of the First Intercolonial Trades Union Congress it was claimed that it was an established fact that the labour organisations of Australasia were "practically unanimous in holding certain opinions in social politics".<sup>17</sup> This report argued that if the fact of labour organisations' unanimity was formally ratified by the Congress, the whole country would give

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15. Australian Institute of Political Science, Trade Unions in Australia, Angus and Robertson, 1959, see Lloyd Ross, 'Trade Unionism in the Twentieth Century', p.19.

16. E.P. Thompson, The Making of the English Working Class, Penguin, England, 1968, pp.456-469.

17. Preface of The First Intercolonial Trades Union Congress, 1879.

proper attention to those shared labour opinions. By demonstrating their shared view of the world in a public announcement which drew attention to their 'aggregate strength' the Congress delegates thought they would impress the legislatures with the wisdom of paying attention to union opinions and of taking them into account when making their legislative decisions.<sup>18</sup>

Speeches at the fifth Intercolonial Trades Union Congress in 1888 showed the growing confidence of the trade union movement in its own ability to represent those Australians who 'live by their labour' in negotiations to improve living standards and to create a more equitable society. Delegates were urged to note that just as the individual worker was "... made strong by the union, so the single society is made more powerful by combination with other societies".<sup>19</sup> At this Congress, too, a committee was given the task of drawing up a Constitution by which a Federation of all Australian unions might be established. By 1890, although Federation had not yet been achieved, some hundreds of unions were affiliated to labour councils.<sup>20</sup>

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18. Ibid.

19. Report of Fifth Intercolonial Trade Union Conference of Australasia, 1888, Op.24

20. J. Hagan, The A.C.T.U. - A Short History, Reed, Sydney, 1977, p.14.

The 1890's themselves were not, however, propitious for the trade union movement, in spite of the great effort to maintain the organisation of the labour movement and to extend and perfect it on the part of labour officials in Sydney.<sup>21</sup> The 'Great Strikes' began in 1890 and from then until 1894 racked the labour movement. The strikes of the 1890's brought a bitter result for unions, since employers and governments combined to defeat them. The eighteen nineties were years of depression with slack trade and high unemployment. For unionists, the nineties also brought a new and favourable factor into their organisational ambit, the formation of the Labor Party, first in New South Wales in 1891, and during the following ten years, in each Australian colony.<sup>22</sup> There was little increase in union membership or in the number of unions. Between 1891 and 1896 the number of unions increased by only eight per cent.<sup>23</sup> The new century however brought steady progress in the fortunes of the union movement.

By 1912 there were five times the number of unions there had been in 1891 and membership of unions had increased eight times<sup>24</sup> in that period. In 1912 it was said that 'Industrial organis-

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21. T.A. Coghlan, Vol.IV, Labour and Industry in Australia, Macmillan, Australia, 1969, p.2026.

22. P.W.D. Matthews and G.W. Ford, Op.cit., p.24.

23. Commonwealth Year Book, 1901-1913, p.906.

24. Ibid.

ation by means of unions now tends to embrace all classes of wage earners'.<sup>25</sup> By 1914 there were 500,000 unionists in Australia.<sup>26</sup>

Such a growth in strength was largely due to the functioning of the Commonwealth Court of Conciliation and Arbitration and the various State Courts of Arbitration and Wages Boards. The Commonwealth Court, established in 1904 to deal with industrial disputes extending beyond the confines of a single state while still protecting State rights, had by 1914 become an influential jurisdiction. Its decisions affected relations between workers and employers throughout Australia<sup>27</sup> and its provisions encouraged the formation and registration of unions. Mr Justice Higgins, whose Harvester judgement of 1907 was to shape the Australian wage structure for sixty years, said of the Conciliation and Arbitration Bill that

The system of arbitration adopted by the Act is based on unionism. Indeed without unions it is hard to conceive how arbitration could be worked.<sup>28</sup>

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25. Australian Commonwealth Year Book, No.5, p.1039.

26. Matthews and Ford, op.cit., p.24.

27. F. Alexander, Australia Since Federation, Third Edition, Nelson, Australia, 1976, p.25.

28. Cited by Lloyd Ross, in Trade Unions in Australia, op.cit., p.9.

So the Illawarra Labor Council's formation in 1914 was an expression not only of an "ethos of mutuality" but was also a logical response to the way in which legislation in Australia had placed an imprimatur of legitimacy and practicality on the organisation of labour into unions and groups of unions.

Labor politicians helped popularise the Commonwealth Court of Conciliation and Arbitration and the various Courts of Arbitration and Wages Boards. The Labor Party believed in compulsory arbitration, seeing it as having electoral appeal as well as giving unions a proper voice in negotiations which affected the living standards and work conditions of their members.

During the first years of the twentieth century, compulsory arbitration had many critics, most of whom had socialist or syndicalist beliefs. These critics claimed that unionism and arbitration had failed to protect the interests of workers. In the Illawarra some of these critics, members of the Industrial Workers of the World, held public meetings to expound their views. At one such meeting in 1913, held in Woonona, it was claimed that craft unionism was '... helpless when opposed to organised Capitalism'.<sup>29</sup> The influence of the I.W.W. can also be

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29. South Coast Times, 2 February 1913.



detected in the prospectus of the proposed amalgamation of Railway workers and the General Labourers who put forward, as one plank of its proposed policy, the abolition of the wages system in favour of co-operative societies which would conduct industry and commerce.<sup>30</sup>

The Illawarra Labor Council decided at its first meeting in January 1914 that the first projects of the Council would be the establishment of a Trades Hall and the '... holding of an annual eight hour demonstration in Wollongong'.<sup>31</sup> These two aims, the one with its intention to present a substantial and conventional face to the community and the other with its reminder of more radical objectives of unions, encapsulate the debates among workers of the period. There were conflicting views between those unionists who welcomed Arbitration and those who, influenced by Marxist socialist ideas and the Industrial Workers of the World, believed that only direct action would bring gains to workers.

The advent of Labor governments in 1910 at both State and Federal levels had encouraged the New South Wales union movement to hope that the welfare of workers would be looked after by

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30. Ibid., 17 January 1913.

31. Ibid., 20 January 1914.

legislative action. In addition, by 1914 the Illawarra district was on the verge of rapid industrialisation.<sup>32</sup> These good omens for the establishment of a Labour Council were not fulfilled. The Council seems barely to have survived the war years<sup>33</sup> and, perhaps, like so many union organisations, did not survive the 1917 N.S.W. General Strike, which was treated by the Government as a rebellion and dealt with by gaoling union leaders, by engaging non-union labour and by de-registering unions. About this time, in any case, the Illawarra Labor Council ceased to function and ten years passed before Illawarra unionists planned once more to form a council of unions.

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32. R. Robinson, Ed., Urban Illawarra, Sorret Publishing, Melbourne, 1977, p.86.

33. Commonwealth Year Book, No.9, p.937.

CHAPTER II

THE ILLAWARRA TRADES AND LABOUR COUNCIL.

1926-1931

In 1926 when the Wollongong Labor Party Branch took the first steps to re-activate the Illawarra Labor Council the published rationale for the proposal was simply that it would be in the best interests of the labour movement.<sup>1</sup> Labor Party people believed that through the voice of unions could the best decisions affecting the lives of workers be made. At the meeting of the Labor Party Branch which discussed the proposal that a Trades and Labor Council be formed, Mr 'Paddy' Molloy took up the motion and the following resolution was carried:

That the Wollongong League convene a meeting of all unions operating between Helensburgh and Kiama, including Port Kembla, for the express purpose of seeking to form a South Coast Trades and Labour Council; that this League does its utmost to secure founding of same and that Sydney Trades and Labour Council be asked to assist in the establishment of this body; that every union be asked to send delegates to a meeting in the Miners' Hall on June 12th.<sup>2</sup>

One letter of invitation to this meeting went to the Labour Council of New South Wales which decided that the secretary, Mr Jock Garden, should attend on behalf of the Sydney Council<sup>3</sup> although there is no record of him doing so. Jock Garden was not a stranger to Wollongong, however, for in February that year he had addressed 'militant unionists' who were in the course of

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1. South Coast Times, May 7, 1926.

2. Ibid., May 21, 1926.

3. Labour Council of New South Wales, Minutes, June 3, 1926.

forming an organisation to be entitled South Coast Vigilants,<sup>4</sup> perhaps another manifestation of the Wollongong unionists' recognition that unity of the local labour movement was becoming urgent. Jock Garden and the N.S.W. Labour Council were engrossed in the struggles to find a workable form for the concept of One Big Union, or a united trade union movement, and to find a way to "... operate a version of a 'united front' policy from within the Labor Party".<sup>5</sup>

A proposal for a new provincial Trades and Labour Council, mooted by a Political Labor League, perhaps seemed of minor importance to Jock Garden, absorbed as he was in his own political struggles. At that time there was division in the labour movement over whether to support the Bruce Government's Essential Services and Industries and Commerce Bills at the coming September referendum. Some Labor parliamentarians believed the Referendum proposals should be supported so that, when Labor won office, its own centralist policies could be more easily implemented. Unionists in Victoria agreed, but the Labor Party Branch and the Labour Council of N.S.W. were involved in persuading rank-and-file unionists and Labor Party members to vote against both the Essential Service and the Industries and

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4. South Coast Times, February 12, 1926.

5. J. Hagan, The History of the A.C.T.U., op.cit., p.41.

Commerce proposals in the referendum. Jock Garden opposed taking this legislative avenue towards a united Trade Union movement, and, through a committee representing the New South Wales Labor Party and the unions in New South Wales, laid down the foundations of the national organisation of all Australian unions which became a reality as the autonomous A.C.T.U. a year later.<sup>6</sup>

The move towards a national unification of trade unions through the Parliament was no doubt followed with interest by the Illawarra labour movement; but it also had an immediate and local reason to try to bring the local unions into a coalition. The move from Lithgow of the steelmakers, Hoskins Ltd., to the site purchased in 1924 at Port Kembla with its deep-water harbour and close proximity to coke supplies and limestone deposits had begun. The Port Kembla-Moss Vale railway which the New South Wales government had agreed to build in order to facilitate the transport of limestone to the steel-works was in progress and already workers from other parts of the country were arriving in Wollongong, attracted by the prospect of employment.<sup>7</sup>

At this time the only union to have a local organisation was the Miners' Federation. Other unions were organised from Sydney

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6. Ibid., p.45.

7. South Coast Times, June 18, 1926.

by officials who visited monthly. Even the Australian Workers' Union, which covered the labourers employed at the steelworks site, as well as the construction workers when the steelworks actually began to be built in January 1927 had only a local secretary who was employed full-time in Metal Manufactures.<sup>8</sup>

There was a steady flow of migrants from many parts of Australia to the Illawarra district which had such a rudimentary union organisation. Their arrival alerted some unionists who feared the development of a vast pool of non-union labour, to the need to co-ordinate and strengthen union structures. No doubt they were concerned also at the Bruce-Page Government's moves to reduce the power and influence of unions, first by amending the Crimes Act to make it pertain to industrial disputes, and then by giving the Arbitration Court increased power to punish offending unions.<sup>9</sup>

The response from local unions to the Labor Party's letter about inaugurating a Labour Council, to local unions was enthusiastic and most unions in the district sent delegates to the 12 June meeting. The Miners' Federation was slow to support the Trades and Labour Council, although the chief proponents of

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8. L. Richardson, The Bitter Years, Hale and Iremonger, Sydney, 1984, p.15.

9. J. Hagan, The History of the A.C.T.U., op.cit., p.41.

the Labour Council were ex-miners, 'Steve' Best and 'Paddy' Molloy. The Miners' Federation was jealous of its role as the doyen of unions in the Illawarra. The miners had established a district organisation of mining lodges in 1879 and had provided the first coalminer to be elected to the New South Wales parliament in 1891.<sup>10</sup>

Since 1916 the Illawarra coalminers had been part of a national union, as the Southern District of the Miners' Federation, which annually elected two salaried officials, a district secretary and president. As an affiliate of the Australian Labor Party, the Miners' Federation gained its members the right to vote at pre-selection ballots for parliamentary candidates.<sup>11</sup> The predominance of the Miners' Federation in the Illawarra labour movement made its support for the embryo Labour Council essential, not only for the organisation skills and political weight the miners would bring to the council but also for the affiliation fees of the largest single union in the Illawarra. The re-establishment of the Labour Council caused some miners to feel that their own union's freedom of action would be curtailed.<sup>12</sup> Other workers interpreted the attitudes of

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10. Winifred Mitchell, op.cit., p.9.

11. L. Richardson, op.cit., p.16.

12. Ibid., p.16.



the miners as being arrogant. Some resented what they claimed the miners' opinion that the Federation was the source of all improvements in workers' conditions.<sup>13</sup> But the miners did affiliate with the Illawarra Trades and Labour council, along with the A.W.U., the A.R.U., Waterside Workers, carpenters, colliery mechanics, United Labourers and meatworkers.<sup>14</sup> In 1927, however, the Miners' Federation withdrew from the new Labour Council for reasons not clear.<sup>15</sup> The Southern District Miners' Federation records for this period do not exist. Some veterans of this period claim the miners withdrew because of a dispute over affiliation fees. The unions other than the Miners' Federation were very small and paid very small fees to fund the Labour Council, causing tensions over authority within the Labour Council.<sup>16</sup> By February 1928 the Illawarra Miners were again attending Labour Council meetings, along with eight other unions, the Municipal Employees having by then affiliated.<sup>17</sup>

The economic climate into which the Illawarra Labour Council was born was not conducive to its healthy growth. The Australian

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13. Interviews with F. Kirkwood, 25 May 1983, and E. Arrowsmith, 20 September, 1984.

14. W. Mitchell, Op.cit., p.11.

15. Ibid.

16. Interview with E. Arrowsmith, op.cit.

17. Illawarra Mercury, 3 February 1928.

G.N.P. had grown extremely slowly in the 1920's. Growth in the G.N.P. was only 0.7% per capita in the years between 1919-20 and 1928-29, compared with a growth five to seven times greater in all other decades since 1861 which, like the decade 1919-1929, had been free of drought, war or depression. In fact in 1927 Australia was in recession, some two years before the New York stock market crash which was the shock fore-runner of the severe contraction in the world economy experienced between 1929-1931.<sup>18</sup> At the same time there were few social welfare provisions and the exigencies of being a worker in industrial unemployment had to be dealt with by the individual worker.<sup>19</sup>

Unemployment was high throughout the 1920's, remaining in excess of 8 per cent, and no government initiatives were undertaken to ameliorate the situation. The orthodox economic theories of the day were that national finance would ebb and flow, and that depressions or recessions were but passing phases of economic life, during which a national effort towards increased and more efficient production was necessary for recovery.<sup>20</sup> Although the Commonwealth Royal Commission on National Insurance 1923-27

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18. C.B. Shedvin, Australia and the Great Depression, Sydney University Press, 1970, pp.18-9.

19. Jill Roe, Social Policy in Australia, Cassell, Australia, 1976, pp.104-5.

20. C.B. Shedvin, op.cit., pp.89-90.

considered the possibility of unemployment insurance, so little was known of the extent of unemployment at the time that the only proposal to come from the Royal Commission was for the establishment of national employment bureaux.<sup>21</sup>

In the 1920s, the chief employer in the Illawarra, the coal mining industry, was in rapid decline. During 1927-28 twenty one percent of New South Wales coal miners earned less than the basic wage, and about fifty percent of them earned less than the average wage for all industries. For miners in the southern coalfields, the average number of working days in 1928 was 175 out of a possible 274.<sup>22</sup>

In Wollongong, unemployment was already of sufficient magnitude in 1926 to generate a demonstration in the streets by unemployed people trying to bring the plight they were in to public attention.<sup>23</sup> The numbers of unemployed workers arriving at Port Kembla and Wollongong increased steadily, as news of the construction work at Hoskins new steel works spread, assisted not a little by the advertising of land agents which claimed, in advertisements of local land for sale, that Hoskins would be

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21. Ibid., p.90.

22. C.G. Castor, Ed., Memorial of the Official Opening of the Miners' Federation Offices, Castor, 1962 (pages not numbered).

23. South Coast Times, 26 March 1926.

putting on five thousand men at their new works. Mr P. Molloy, vice-president of the rudimentary Labour Council urged that these 'boomsters' be made to refrain from this practice,<sup>24</sup> but legislation controlling the accuracy of claims made in advertisements was almost half a century away and the practice continued.

By 1928 the Illawarra Mercury frequently reported 'entertainments' to raise money for the unemployed, and the Wollongong Labour Exchange had 450 unemployed on its register, '... not counting those who were on short time at the mines and registered for another job'.<sup>25</sup> The miners' leader Mr F. Lowden put the figures higher. He claimed one thousand unemployed men and another '... 1,000 to 1,200 men who ... are only working one day per week'.<sup>26</sup> The Illawarra Trades and Labour Council was but eighteen months old when unemployment had reached this level in a total population of some 24,000,<sup>27</sup> and the anxiety that the local workers felt about unemployed men from other districts coming to Wollongong seeking work was shared by both the trade unions and

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24. Illawarra Mercury, 9 March, 1928.

25. Ibid.

26. Ibid.

27. R. Robinson, op.cit., p.93. This figure is calculated from population statistics presented here, and does not include Shoalhaven or Bulli.

the city fathers. In February 1928, the Mayor of Wollongong, assisted by Messrs. Lowden and Sweeney, of the Trades and Labour Council convened a 'big meeting of unemployed' at Wollongong.<sup>28</sup>

In spite of warnings which emanated from this meeting through the local press about the grim prospects for those seeking work in the Illawarra, the Illawarra Mercury reported in August

The warning has not had the desired effect with the result there is a long list of men seeking work with small prospects of being able to obtain it.<sup>29</sup>

Public protest meetings were organised in the district indicating that Wollongong unionists, like their colleagues throughout Australia, were alert to the threats posed to the union movement by the Federal Government's Amended Arbitration Act. Those attending firmly resolved to fight the amendments.<sup>30</sup>

The amendments empowered the Arbitration Court, of its own accord, to refer any question arising out of an industrial dispute to a secret ballot thus taking from unions their right,

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28. Illawarra Mercury, 9 March 1928.

29. Ibid., 24 August 1928.

30. Ibid., 9 March 1928.

shared only with employers, to decide when to take disputes to the Arbitration Court. The fall of the Bruce-Page government in 1929 was partly due to workers' rejection of the amendments. In the Illawarra they served militant unionists as an example of the need for unity amongst workers to preserve their right to organise.

CHAPTER III

INTO THE DEPRESSION

The Illawarra Trades and Labour Council was led for fourteen years by its lone paid official, Mr S. (Steve) Best. Steve Best was appointed the first paid secretary-organiser of I.T.&L.C. 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.<sup>1</sup> While working on the construction site at Hoskins Ltd., his attempts at organisation of the workers there led to his dismissal once again.<sup>2</sup> Steve Best was a radical who remained 'in but not of the Labor Party'<sup>3</sup> who never became a member of the Communist Party<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup>

A colleague described him as an ideal secretary of the Trades and Labour Council - 'trustworthy, efficient, a good Labor

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1. Illawarra Mercury, 31 May 1940.
  2. Ibid.
  3. L. Boardman, interview, 23 February 1984.
  4. Ibid.
  5. Ibid.



party member, progressive'.<sup>6</sup> 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,<sup>7</sup> while still another Communist colleague said that Steve Best 'at the very least' had great sympathy with Communist ideas.<sup>8</sup> 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<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup> Both he and 'Paddy' Molloy have been described by a Communist colleague as militant A.L.P. members, never Communists, but

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6. E. Arrowsmith, interview, op.cit.

7. W. McDougal, interview, 10 November 1983.

8. E. Harvey, interview, 6 February 1984.

9. South Coast Times, 15 August 1930.

10. L. Boardman, interview, op.cit.

... 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.<sup>11</sup>

(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.<sup>12</sup> The F.I.A. '... could count its Wollongong members on one hand at that time'.<sup>13</sup> These few were 'imported' with the works from Lithgow and Rhodes, a Sydney suburb,<sup>14</sup> and they set about unionising

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11. Ibid.

12. J.A. Merrit, A History of the Federated Ironworkers Association of Australia, 1909-1952, Unpublished thesis, Australian National University, 1967, p.148.

13. E. Arrowsmith, interview, op.cit.

14. Ibid.

other workers in Hoskins Steelworks. Of ninety-five workers in the spun pipe department, all were union members by the end of 1929,<sup>15</sup> 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.<sup>16</sup> The price of refusing an offer from the management to a staff appointment was often dismissal, and always blacklisting.<sup>17</sup> Often men 'chose' to become salaried staff because they feared for their small families,<sup>18</sup> 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.<sup>19</sup>

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15. Ibid.

16. J.A. Merrit, op.cit., p.143.

17. Ibid., and Interview E. Arrowsmith, op.cit.

18. Mr and Mrs C. Owen, Interview, 23 May 1983.

19. Ibid.

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.<sup>20</sup>

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'.<sup>21</sup> 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.<sup>22</sup>

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20 Illawarra Mercury, 3 February 1928.

21. Ibid.

22. L. Boardman, and E. Arrowsmith, interviews, op.cit.

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.<sup>23</sup>

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.<sup>24</sup>

In the late twenties workers and union officials in the Hoskins Steelworks who belonged to the F.I.A. occasionally considered joining forces with the A.W.U. or another

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23. Winifred Mitchell, op.cit., p.11.

24. E. Arrowsmith, op.cit.

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 A.W.U. 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 F.I.A., had when they tried to recruit workers to their organisations. The reluctance shown by workers at the F.I.A.'s first attempts to form the union at Port Kembla was said to be based on their observations of how the A.W.U. failed to help its members.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> 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.<sup>27</sup> The southern coalfields

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25. Ibid and J.A. Merrit, 'The Federated Ironworkers' Association in the Depression', Labour History, Vol.IV, No.1, 1964, p.49.

26. L. Richardson, op.cit., p.37.

27. Report of the Royal Commission into the Coal Industry, 1930, pp.302-6.

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<sup>28</sup> 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.<sup>29</sup>

Production fell from that point in two years to only 984,496 tons in 1931;<sup>31</sup> 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.<sup>31</sup>

The manufacturing industries which operated in Port Kembla also faced declining demand for their products in the late 1920's and early 1930's. The Electrolytic Refining and Smelting Co. Ltd., and Metal Manufactures which had operated since 1908 and 1918 respectively, and Australian Fertilizers Ltd., established

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28. New South Wales Statistical Register, 1932-33.

29. Ibid.

30. Ibid.

31. L. Boardman, interview, op.cit.

in 1921,<sup>32</sup> all had members of the A.W.U. 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.<sup>33</sup> 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.<sup>34</sup> The Port Kembla Ironworkers had to ask its State executive for financial assistance to pay its Federal affiliation fee in 1930<sup>35</sup> 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".<sup>36</sup>

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32. G. Griffiths, 'Growing Militancy of the South Coast Branch of the Waterside Workers Federation 1930-1939', Honours Thesis, The University of Wollongong, N.S.W., 1980.

33. Illawarra Mercury, 12 December 1929.

34. L. Richardson, op.cit., p.54.

35. P. Merrit, op.cit., p.172.

36. Illawarra Mercury, 31 July 1931.



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'.<sup>37</sup> 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.<sup>38</sup>

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

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37. L. Boardman, interview, op.cit.

38. South Coast Times, 10 January 1930.

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,<sup>39</sup> 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 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.<sup>40</sup>

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,<sup>41</sup> 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.

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39. Illawarra Mercury, 14 December 1929.

40. L. Richardson, op.cit., p.61.

41. L. Boardman, interview, op.cit.

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.<sup>42</sup> 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.<sup>43</sup> 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'.<sup>44</sup>

One veteran of this period described the labour movement's response to this Municipal decision as 'a rallying point'.<sup>45</sup> 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'<sup>46</sup> for Illawarra workers. Neither the

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42. South Coast Times, 8 April 1930.

43. L. Richardson, op.cit., p.77.

44. Ibid.

45. L. Boardman, interview, op.cit.

46. Illawarra Mercury, 25 July 1930.

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.<sup>47</sup>

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.<sup>48</sup> One leader of the unemployed, Len Boardman, had no

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47. L. Boardman, interview, op.cit.

48. Ibid.

home from 1930 to 1934 but lived 'house to house' with colleagues, ensuring that all sections of the U.W.M. were informed about each others' activities.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> shortly 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 a para-military group 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 commonsense, and a determination to

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49. Ibid.

50. Sydney Morning Herald, 26 March 1931.

foil any attempt by the Government to foist socialisation on the people.<sup>51</sup>

In the Illawarra, where hundreds of unemployed were encamped in humpies and tents, where dole queues generated 'ready made meetings'<sup>52</sup> for the Unemployed Workers' Movement's organisers and where street marchers 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.<sup>53</sup> 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

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51. Russell Ward, A Nation for a Continent, Heinemann, Australia, 1981, pp.193-4.

52. L. Boardman, interview, op.cit.

53. L. Richardson, op.cit., p.90.

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 A.W.U.'.<sup>54</sup>

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. It 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.<sup>55</sup> In Wollongong it developed an efficient self help system for its members, organised through those who had been Trades and Labour 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.<sup>56</sup> Robert Shayler believed that the unemployed movement should avoid acting as distributors of charity and, although he thought that it was more important that

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54. Ibid.

55. A. Davidson, The Communist Party of Australia - A Short History, California, 1969, pp.60-61.

56. L. Boardman, interview, op.cit.

the unemployed be organised '... against the danger of being used by the employers in their attacks on wages and working conditions',<sup>57</sup> he was able to work productively with the secretary of the Illawarra Trades and Labour council, Steve Best.

In May 1930 the U.W.M. claimed 3,000 members<sup>58</sup> 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'.<sup>59</sup> 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.<sup>60</sup>

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57. South Coast times, 23 May 1930.

58. Illawarra Mercury, 2 May 1930.

59. South Coast times, 30 May 1930



The Free Speech Campaign and the U.W.M. 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.<sup>61</sup> 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.<sup>62</sup>

Len Boardman joined the Communist Party in Wollongong soon after he arrived. Out of work, he joined the U.W.M. and became its secretary. All these men courageously worked with Steve Best and others throughout the Depression<sup>63</sup> 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 attention someone was always available to help.<sup>64</sup> The Illawarra

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60. E. Arrowsmith, interview, op.cit.

61. L. Richardson, op.cit., p.78; L. Boardman, interview, op.cit.

62. L. Boardman, interview, op.cit.

63. Ibid.

64. Ibid.

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 IV

### 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.<sup>1</sup>

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.<sup>2</sup>

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.<sup>3</sup> Coal consumption, coke production and iron and steel production at

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1. C.B. Shedvin, op.cit., pp.7-9.
  2. Ibid., p.289.
  3. Illawarra Mercury, 5 May 1933.

A.I. & S. all increased sharply in 1933 with steadily climbing production levels from thereon.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup>

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

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4. A.I.S. Pty Ltd., Port Kembla, Statistics Sheet, 1929-83.

5. G. Griffiths, op.cit., p.53.

with the State government in return for the building of the Moss Vale-Port Kembla railway.<sup>6</sup> B.H.P.'s takeover in 1935 had been made possible by the strong position that company was in, especially vis-a-vis A.I. & S., in its Newcastle steelworks. A.I.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 B.H.P.<sup>7</sup> The company thus formed, B.H.P./A.I. & S. Ltd, was reported to be one of the most important and influential companies in Australia.<sup>8</sup>

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. B.H.P./A.I. & 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 Steel works by the

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6. H. Hughes, The Australian Iron and Steel Industry 1848-1962, Melbourne, 1964, p.106.

7. Ibid., p.116.

8. Sydney Morning Herald, 19 October 1935.

end of the thirties.<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup>

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 market supplied. The solution which B.H.P./A.I. & 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 B.H.P./A.I.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.<sup>12</sup> Throughout the thirties, too, men seeking work stood on 'the Hill' anxious for employment and a constant

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9. H. Hughes, op.cit., pp.114-116.

10. Ibid.

11. C.B Shedvin, op.cit., pp.295-305.

12. L. Boardman, E. Arrowsmith, and others, interviews, op.cit.

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 B.H.P.'s expansion. Lysaghts Pty Ltd, Commonwealth Oil Refineries and the service industries all helped to maintain the impetus, and to provide employment.<sup>13</sup>

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.<sup>14</sup>

The most popular camp was the Flinders Street site, for this gave view of 'the Hill' outside the Steelworks, where any sign that work was offering would first be seen.<sup>15</sup>

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13. L. Richardson, op.cit., p.132.

14. L. Boardman, E. Arrowsmith, and others, interviews, op.cit.

15. L. Boardman, et alia, interviews, op.cit.



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 B.H.P./A.I.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.<sup>16</sup>

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 only about twenty, I think. People had to live where they could. The Labour Council set up a Housing Committee, too.<sup>17</sup>

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16. South Coast times, 23 August 1935.

17. L. Boardman, interview, op.cit.

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'<sup>18</sup> 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, 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, F.E.D.F.A., United Labourers, the A.R.U., Building Trades Federation, Moulders Union, the F.I.A. and the Amalgamated Engineering Union attended.<sup>19</sup> 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.<sup>20</sup>

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18. South Coast Times, 9 August 1935.

19. Ibid., 23 August 1935.

20. Ibid.

Orr was a member of the Militant Minority Movement and had, with Charles Nelson, also of the M.M.M., won leadership in the Miners' Federation in 1934. His public overtures to the Australian Labour 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 M.M.M. 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 of the Communist Party which had held since 1929, when those who advocated or resorted to arbitration within the democratic structure were branded 'social fascists'.<sup>21</sup> 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

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21. A. Davidson, op.cit., p.59.

chosen for the task because he had worked in A.I. & S in 1930, losing his job when the Depression drastically cut demand for steel and the Steelworks sacked one thousand of fourteen hundred workers.<sup>22</sup> 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.<sup>23</sup>

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.<sup>24</sup>

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22. W. McDougal, interview, op.cit.

23. Workers' Weekly, 20 September 1935.

24. South Coast Times, 20 September 1935.

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'.<sup>25</sup> 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.<sup>26</sup> The Labour 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

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25. Ibid.

26. W. McDougal, interview, op.cit.

suppression of working class activities'.<sup>27</sup> This the New South Wales Labour Council agreed to do because of the delegates' wish to create unity within the labour movement.<sup>28</sup>

Fred Lowden, as President, reported the intention of the Illawarra Trades and Labour Council to invite the F.E.D.F.A., the W.W.F., Shop Assistants, Meat Industries 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.<sup>29</sup>

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

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27. New South Wales Labour Council, Minutes, 29 August 1935.

28. Ibid.

29. South Coast Times, 20 September 1935.

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.<sup>30</sup>

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,<sup>31</sup> 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 C.P.A.<sup>32</sup>

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30. R. Gollan, *Revolutionaries and Reformists*, A.N.U. Press, Canberra, 1975, pp.35-6.

31. L. Boardman, interview, op.cit.

32. Ibid.

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.<sup>33</sup>

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'<sup>34</sup> the Miners' Federation gave indication of the politics of their leadership and of many of the rank and file members too.

The A.C.T.U. Congress of 1935 had opposed 'war in all its forms' and involvement of Australian workers in overseas

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33. R. Gollan, op.cit., pp.44-5.

34. Illawarra Mercury, 5 May 1935.



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.<sup>35</sup> 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 more strongly against appeasement and for solidarity against 'Fascist Aggression' once the A.C.T.U. had taken such a definite stand.<sup>36</sup>

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 the battle kept news of the Spanish Civil War in union journals and Labour Council minutes, through which their colleagues at home

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35. J. Hagan, The History of the A.C.T.U., op.cit., p.106.

36. L. Richardson, op.cit., p.202.

were reminded of the struggle in Spain.<sup>37</sup> 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.<sup>38</sup> 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.<sup>39</sup>

The need was indeed still considerable and was brought to the attention of the Prime Minister of Australia, Mr J.A. Lyons 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.<sup>40</sup> Mrs Croft spoke of '... 2,700 people still living in bag humpies,

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37. Illawarra Trades and Labour Council Minutes, File T31/7, Australian National University Archives.

38. South Coast Times, 9 August 1935.

39. Ibid.

40. Ibid., 18 October, 1935.

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.<sup>41</sup>

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 F.I.A., the Miners' Federation, F.E.D.F.A., 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.<sup>42</sup>

Steve Best, 'trustworthy, progressive, efficient' was

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41. Ibid.

42. E. Arrowsmith, interview, op.cit.

regarded as an ideal Trades and Labour Council secretary<sup>43</sup> 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.<sup>44</sup> 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'.<sup>45</sup>

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.<sup>46</sup> 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 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

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43. Ibid.

44. L. Richardson, op.cit., p.144.

45. Len Boardman, interview, op.cit.

46. South Coast Times, 8 November 1935.

a relief worker earned £1.0.3 for thirteen hours work.<sup>47</sup> 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 Labour 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.<sup>48</sup> 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.<sup>49</sup>

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.<sup>50</sup> In addition to reduced employment, Orr and Nelson claimed that mechanisation in the mines would place pressure on miners to work

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47. Jill Røe, Social Policy in Australia, Cassell, 1976, p.198.

48. Labour Council of New South Wales, Minutes, 24 October 1935.

49. South Coast Times, 8 November 1935.

50. L. Richardson, Op.cit., p.165.

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.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> 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'.<sup>53</sup> 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,

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51. R. Gollan, The Coalminers of New South Wales, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1963, pp.202-3.

52. Illawarra Mercury, 30 November 1934.

53. F. Kirkwood, interview, op.cit.

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:

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.<sup>54</sup>

The Illawarra Trades and Labour Council gave moral support, passed resolutions and publicised the miners' struggle for their log of claims<sup>55</sup> 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.<sup>56</sup>

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'.<sup>57</sup> In the Illawarra, the united front which the Communist Party of Australia formally adopted in 1935 was already a practical

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54. Ibid.

55. L. Boardman, interview, op.cit.

56. International Women's Day Leaflet, 1981.

57. South Coast Times, 6 December 1935.

reality.<sup>58</sup> 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.

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58. L. Boardman, interview, op.cit.



CHAPTER V

FROM STRENGTH TO STRENGTH - 1936-1945

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 B.H.P./A.I.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 F.I.A. was de-registered in the process and Norman Annabel did not achieve a return to the 36' mill.<sup>1</sup>

Overtime was reduced, however, and in addition, the combined

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1. A.E.U. Souvenir, 25th Anniversary, Worker Trustees, Sydney, 1946, p.190.

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<sup>2</sup> 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 F.I.A. and the A.E.U., 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 B.H.P./A.I.S. '... showed greater interest in providing elaborate housing for machinery than for human beings'.<sup>3</sup> Since the Company

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2. Memorial Booklet, Official Opening, Trade Union Centre, Castor, 1962 (pages unnumbered).

3. Illawarra Mercury, 17 September 1937.

had declared definitely that it would never countenance financial assistance to its employees, and that it was not company policy to undertake housing schemes<sup>4</sup> this was literally true. The Illawarra Labour Council, the local government of the district and the South Coast Housing Committee all believed that B.H.P./A.I.S. had some responsibility to house workers and on this basis the Labour Council built some unity with new friends, the municipal councils.<sup>5</sup> 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'.<sup>6</sup> 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

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4. L. Richardson, op.cit., p.140.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.

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 1938 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 F.I.A., the F.E.D.F.A, and the A.W.U.<sup>7</sup> 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

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7. Garry Griffiths, op.cit., p.79.

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. B.H.P. 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.<sup>8</sup>

Further cause for confidence was the support lent by the Executive of the A.C.T.U., which had been consulted by the W.W.F. 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 W.W.F. 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 wharflabourers call the Dog Collar Act.<sup>9</sup> A visit by Mr R.G. Menzies, Federal Attorney-General, to meet the combined unions committee was arranged to settle the dispute.

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8. File T31/1, Correspondence, 6 January 1938 [sic] [1939].

9. J. Hagan, The A.C.T.U. - A Short History, op.cit., p.46.

'The welcome' which the Disputes Committee arranged was described in the local press as one Mr Menzies would not readily forget.<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup> The Dalfram 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

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10. Gary Griffiths, op.cit., p.85.

11. A.E.U. Souvenir, op.cit., p.229.

World War II later in 1939, the continuing push southward by Japanese forces and the subsequent attack on Australia by Japan confirmed the W.W.F. 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'.<sup>12</sup>

The Labour Council in its support of the W.W.F. 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

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12. Illawarra Mercury, 13 January, 1939.



civil liberties were being undermined caused widespread opposition to them and the refusal of many workers to register under the National Registration Act. The A.C.T.U. 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'.<sup>13</sup>

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.<sup>14</sup> By the end of July, however, the A.C.T.U. 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<sup>15</sup> had provided these safeguards and trade union objections ceased.

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13. A.E.U. Souvenir, op.cit., p.237.

14. File T31/7, op.cit., circular, 1 June 1939.

15. A.E.U. Souvenir, op.cit., p.238.

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.<sup>16</sup> The Illawarra Trades and Labour Council's conference protested at the decision to declare the C.P.A. 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.<sup>17</sup> 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 'phoney war', the term describing the period when many Australians feared that the Federal Government's advocacy of

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16. L. Boardman and W. McDougal, interviews, op.cit.

17. File T31/7, op.cit., list of resolutions.

appeasement and rapprochement with Germany indicated support for Fascism.<sup>18</sup> 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.

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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 a car accident as he returned from a Sydney bowling trip, Steve Best's death brought obituaries from the whole community.<sup>19</sup> 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

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18. R. Ward, A Nation for a Continent, Heinemann, Australia, 1981, p.234.

19. Illawarra Mercury, 31 May 1940.

district 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.<sup>20</sup>

At the funeral, five hundred unionists and officers of all South Coast unions and lodges, officers and members of A.L.P. 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 M.L.A., 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.

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20. Ibid.

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.<sup>21</sup> 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,<sup>22</sup> where the mass meetings and fund-raising concerts of waterside workers had been held in the Dalfram dispute.<sup>23</sup> 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.

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21. Illawarra Mercury, 14 June 1940.

22. A.P. Fleming, Wollongong Rest Park, Illawarra Historical Society Publication, 1971.

23. Olive Howe, interview, 24 June 1983.

Steve Best's death came just a few days after the 'phoney war' ended in early May 1940. The end of the 'phoney 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 A.C.T.U., 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.<sup>24</sup> The I.T.& L.C. 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'<sup>25</sup> which sent delegates to a meeting in Sydney of the Congress

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24. R. Gollan, Revolutionaries and Reformists, op.cit., p.94.

25. Illawarra Mercury, 10 May 1940.

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 holted [sic] ...'<sup>26</sup> The Illawarra Trades and Labour Council policy on international affairs was very close to C.P.A. 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

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26. File T31/7, op.cit.

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'.<sup>27</sup>

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.<sup>28</sup> John Curtin's Labor Government was welcomed by Communists and Conservatives alike<sup>29</sup> 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

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27. File T31/7, Annual Report, 18 February 1941.

28. R. Ward, Op.cit., pp.243-4.

29. B. McKinlay, A Documentary History of the Australian Labour Movement, 1850-1975, Drummond, Victoria, 1979, p.149.



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'.<sup>30</sup> 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.<sup>31</sup>

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30. File T31/7, op.cit., 22 October 1941.

31. Ibid.

CHAPTER VI

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,<sup>1</sup> and the high demand for steel and steel manufactures made B.H.P./A.I.S. 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.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> Again in March, ironworkers in the A.I.S. 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.<sup>4</sup> But from the entry of Germany on to Russian soil,

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1. Migrant Workers in the Steel Industry, Author not stated, Federated Ironworkers Association Library, Wollongong, p.5.

2. Commonwealth Year Book, 1949, p.400.

3. South Coast Times, 29 March 1940.

4. E. Arrowsmith, interview, op.cit.

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 A.C.T.U. also adopted a co-operative attitude to the Curtin Government, quite unlike the grudging responses which the Menzies Government had evoked. The A.C.T.U. now sought to be represented on public bodies and wartime authorities, and became almost integrated with the machinery of the State at War.<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup> 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 A.C.T.U.'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,

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5. J. Hagan, The History of the A.C.T.U., op.cit., p.179.

6. Ibid.

with guarantees of male workers' access to jobs after the war. Such a policy had the advantages for the A.C.T.U. of increasing its strength and its stature.<sup>7</sup>

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.<sup>8</sup> The Labour Council also assiduously maintained relations with other provincial councils, especially Newcastle, and they mutually exchanged speakers for festivals such as May Day.<sup>9</sup>

By 1944, the Illawarra Trades and Labour Council had thirty unions affiliated, paying affiliation fees for 10,494 members.<sup>10</sup>

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7. Ibid., pp.179-80.

8. Heavy Industries Clerical Officers' Association Minutes, 1942.

9. Illawarra Trades and Labour Council Minutes, passim, 1943-45.

10. Affiliation Fees Book, 1944, S.C.L.C. Records, S.C.L.C. Office.

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'.<sup>11</sup>

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.<sup>12</sup>

The A.C.T.U. 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,

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11. Illawarra Trades and Labour council, Minutes, op.cit., 27 October 1943.

12. R. Ward, op.cit., p.252.

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.<sup>13</sup> 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.<sup>14</sup>

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:

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13. J. Hagan, The History of the A.C.T.U., op.cit., p.182.

14. Commonwealth Year Book, 1949, p.400.

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.<sup>15</sup>

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.<sup>16</sup>

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 B.H.P./A.I.S. which eventually involved 13,000 steelworkers representing fifteen trade unions. The strike lasted until 6th January 1946,

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15. Illawarra Trades and Labour Council, Minutes, op.cit., 3 January 1945.

16. Ibid.



and became known as the Parker Dispute, after Don Parker, an Ironworkers' shop delegate at A.I.& 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 employed<sup>17</sup> 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.<sup>18</sup>

Attempts to negotiate with the Company to solve the matter were refused by the Company on the grounds that the F.I.A. 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, B.H.P./A.I.S. 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

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17. Illawarra Trades and Labour Council and Newcastle Trades Hall Council, The Story of the Steel Strike of 1945, St. George Newspaper Print, University of Wollongong Archives, p.7.

18. Ibid., p.9.

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.<sup>19</sup>

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, and, in early January, the Full Bench of the Industrial Commission ordered A.I.S. to re-instate Parker. A later hearing re-registered the F.I.A.<sup>20</sup>

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 F.I.A. official of Port Kembla F.I.A. Branch said 'the State Labour Council tried to squash the locals out'<sup>21</sup> but 'the locals' were determined in this dispute because they firmly believed that there was a

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19. Ibid., p.13.

20. Migrant Workers in the Steel Industry, p.12.

21. W. Frame, interview, op.cit.

deliberate attempt by B.H.P. 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.<sup>22</sup>

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, rabbiting, 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

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22. Ibid.

of the Illawarra the Area Committees kept the strikers and their families fed and busy.<sup>23</sup>

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.<sup>24</sup>

Like the ironworker, the I.T.& L.C. felt strong after the 1945 Steel Strike and increasingly so as the post-war years unfolded.

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23. The Story of the ..... of 1945, op.cit., p.53-61.

24. N. Branney, Interview, 7 April 1983.

**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 I.T. & L.C. 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 A.C.T.U.

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

The I.T.& L.C. 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 I.T.& L.C. in maintaining its functions whenever its affiliates' membership was reduced by unemployment.

The anti-isolationists policies expressed by the I.T.& L.C. 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 I.T.& L.C. The Labour Council endorsed the policies adopted by the New South Wales Labour Council and the A.C.T.U. focussing them on the two young Wollongong men who had gone to fight in the International Brigade.

The A.C.T.U. 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 W.W.F., 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 A.C.T.U. which eventually led the settlement moves. The workers of the Illawarra by their wholehearted support for the

Port Kembla waterside workers focussed 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 C.P.A. was expressed by participation in the forums of the New South Wales Labour Council. The I.T.& L.C. organised the representation of all Illawarra unions at the Sydney Congress Against Conscription 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 Labour Government and the critical situation which the war had reached allowed the A.C.T.U. 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 I.T.& L.C. 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 C.P.A. policy from opposition to wholehearted support for the war effort.

The I.T.& L.C. 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 and 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 I.T.& L.C. 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 I.T.& L.C. was outside the A.C.T.U.'s policy of co-operation with the government in return for workers' representation on public bodies and wartime authorities. The I.T.& L.C. adopted its own policy.

The concentration of employment in two main industries, the A.I.S. steelworks and coal mining meant that industrial disputes affecting these industries affected a large component of the workforce. Therefore the leadership of the I.T.& L.C., 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 I.T.& L.C. 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.

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