In 1931 the Moss Vale Municipal Council convinced the State Cabinet and the New South Wales Department of Labour and Industry to trial a new scheme for the provision of relief work for the unemployed. This scheme involved Council using the State Government’s food relief money, commonly called the dole, for wages to employ men in relief work. Although it was to set the pattern of unemployment assistance throughout New South Wales for the remainder of the decade, the scheme was not designed to solve the economic problems of the State and the Commonwealth. It was designed to meet the needs of the people of Moss Vale and the surrounding district. In the establishment and operation of this scheme an active sense of community can be seen in the town at that time. This scheme is an example of people acting through and because of local community ties, loyalties and values. This approach to helping the unemployed men of the town was found in the memory of the community, not in the bureaucracy of state government, and was motivated by a community ideology which involved the right to work. The operation of the scheme also demonstrates that the apparently powerless unemployed had both social power and an active political role derived from their involvement in, and membership of, their local community.

In the early years of the depression unemployment relief in New South Wales, as in the other states, was disorganised. The governments of Australia, whatever their political orientation, were simply not prepared for the task of dealing with the problems of high levels of unemployment. It was not until 1933 that New South Wales had a centrally organised system of unemployment relief. Until that time, assistance for the unemployed came in a variety of forms. The non-government state or national charity organisations such as the Red Cross were heavily relied upon. Apart from the dole, the State Government provided some relief work through the Department of Labour and Industry. The main source of assistance, however, was from local government bodies who provided limited relief work.

The reason for the difference in responses to the problems of unemployment from different levels of government appears to be one of proximity. For the Government of New South Wales unemployment was a formidable dilemma, but one that could be dealt with impersonally. At times members of the Government even went to some effort to ensure the issue remained an impersonal one. An example of this is the response of Mark Morton, Moss Vale’s local member, to a report in the Sydney Morning Herald that the Minister for Works and the Minister for Labour and Industry had requested a meeting of the unemployed of Moss Vale to suggest ways of providing employment in the district. In a letter to the Moss Vale paper the Scrutineer he wrote:

Immediately on reading [the report in the Sydney Morning Herald] I interviewed the ministers concerned...who both informed me that they never called for any such suggestions, and further, that if they wished to obtain [such suggestions] they would consult the Municipal Council. For those involved in local government, on the other hand, the unemployment problem was quite different. At the town and district level the unemployed were ‘real’ people and not simply statistics. They were neighbours, friends and importantly, members of the local community. The elected council also had a direct role in the provision of services that brought them into contact with the struggle of the unemployed during the depression. The members of the Moss Vale Council, for example, were required to personally deal with letters such as one received from Mrs C. Belpits asking Council to put over her electricity account until the end of the month when she could pay it in full. This letter is particularly significant because her husband was a leader of the unemployed group in Moss Vale. To local council members, the plight of the unemployed could not be easily ignored.

Local councils funded their relief work programs either from their own reserves or by taking low interest loans from the State Government. Like many councils, the Moss Vale Municipality quickly found it difficult to continue providing relief work for the local unemployed. As early as July 1930 the Mayor of Moss Vale, Mr Alexander South, was having to defend the way he was allocating the work. In reply to a question in the council he stated he was ‘trying his best to give relief to everyone’. It was, no doubt, a demanding task and one that was becoming increasingly difficult as the council’s own financial situation deteriorated. At this time South, along with the Town Engineer, Mr Leonard, prepared a submission to the government proposing that the government allocate dole monies to the council without work. It was, no doubt, a demanding task and one that was becoming increasingly difficult as the council’s own financial situation deteriorated. At this time South, along with the Town Engineer, Mr Leonard, prepared a submission to the government proposing that the government allocate dole monies to the council without work. It was, no doubt, a demanding task and one that was becoming increasingly difficult as the council’s own financial situation deteriorated. At this time South, along with the Town Engineer, Mr Leonard, prepared a submission to the government proposing that the government allocate dole monies to the council without work.
of the community so the notion of these men accepting charity was still unacceptable. As with the general problems of unemployment in the depression this problem was first dealt with at the local level. It was at this level that the unemployed men were known and that the full clash between community ideology and material reality could be seen. It is at this level too that the community’s attempts to adapt its understandings and ideologies to meet changing conditions can best be seen.

Possibly the easiest way for a community to deal with a situation its belief system is unable to incorporate is to blame others. This allows the group to maintain a belief that its understandings of the world are ‘right’ and would work if not for the interference of others. High unemployment was just one of the problems that the locals of the Moss Vale area saw as having been imposed upon the district. At Mack’s Theatre in Moss Vale on 11 March, 1931, over 500 people from all over the district met to discuss some of these problems including the high tax on primary producers, the poor trade balance and the excessive level of government in the Australian federal system. These topics also drew continuous criticism in the editorial and letters columns of the local papers throughout the depression. In all these settings the criticisms were not directed at anyone in particular, they were just directed at the ‘outside’. For most of these issues there was little the residents of Moss Vale could do except to remonstrate. Unemployment relief was alone in that something practical could be done about it at the local level, so long as the money could be found.

South’s original proposal was turned down by the state government but early 1931 he prepared another. This time South was aided by the prominent ‘progressive’ alderman and solicitor, Mr H.H. Paine and he had a far more specific proposal. On 24 March, 1931, South and Paine presented their plan to the State Cabinet. It involved Council using dole monies to employ men to build a new sports ground and sewage system in Moss Vale. Council would cover the material, supervision and insurance costs by taking a loan from the government. The Government appears to have made no commitment at this meeting, but South must have felt confident of the outcome. The next day he held meetings with the Park Committee and the Unemployment Committee in Moss Vale and announced there would be three-and-a-half months of rationed work on the park after Easter. The park was a community project that had been around for a number of years. Between 1927 and 1929 over £500 had been raised by the people of Moss Vale to build it. This money was held in trust by the Council but it was not Council money.

It would be wrong to suggest that the only motive South and Paine had for pushing this scheme was the well being of the unemployed of the town. Both men were prominent in their support for town development, and this scheme provided an excellent opportunity for further development. The design of the scheme, however, was an adaption of the soldier repatriation scheme used in the early 1920s. South, who was involved in the upper levels of the RSL, would certainly have been aware of its use then. The primary purpose of the repatriation scheme had been to help the soldiers, so it is reasonable to assume that South’s primary purpose in promoting the scheme in the depression was to help the unemployed and allow them to work. Such a conclusion would be supported by the fact that running the scheme, even with the Government paying the wages, cost the Council a great deal of money in covering the other expenses. Financially, the Council would have been better off if the dole system continued. The relief scheme should not be seen as a ‘money grab’ by the Council. It was a scheme the Council genuinely felt would benefit the local unemployed.

It was almost a month later, after further negotiations, that Council received a letter from the New South Wales Department of Labour and Industry that actually approved the scheme:

The treasurer has approved £850 being made available to the Local Government Department for expenditure by the council in weekly payments and for the employment of men who are at present receiving food relief. The Local Government Department has been requested to prepare a form of agreement or undertaking to be signed by the council in this matter, and only those persons referred to you by the local officer in charge of police are to be employed on this work.

The Department specified that work would be rationed according to the number of dependents, that the men would be employed for a seven hour day at award rates and that Council was to pay insurance and costs. The sewage system was not included in this scheme, although it did go ahead and was later used to provide some relief work in Moss Vale.

A month into the scheme the Moss Vale Post reported that only a minority of the unemployed of Moss Vale had refused to take part in the scheme. In the following months a number of other councils came to a similar arrangement with the Government, including the Wingecarribee Shire Council which surrounded the town of Moss Vale. The winter of 1931 proved to be a wet one in Moss Vale which delayed work on the park. When work on the park was impossible, Council used the funds available to employ men on road work. This, however, meant that the park was not finished when the funds for the scheme were exhausted. At the end of October Council held a meeting with a representative from the State Labour Exchange, and the local member, Mark Morton, with a view to extending the scheme. Here the best offer Council received was a new plan in which the Council and the Government would fund the wages on a pound-for-pound basis. Council felt it was unable to afford this and the scheme came to an end, although similar schemes were set up in following years in Moss Vale and throughout the state.

On the same day as this meeting of the Council, the unemployed men of Moss Vale held a meeting of their own at Leighton Gardens in the centre of town. Here they passed a motion stating that, having trialed the scheme, they refused to work under the same conditions again. They also demanded that in any new scheme an extra day’s work be provided for every man, regardless of pay scale. The men at the meeting also registered their disapproval of the ‘underhanded manner which the Moss Vale Council employed to have the unemployed work on the roads without giving us a voice in the matter’.

The motions passed by the Leighton Gardens meeting of unemployed men highlight two very important aspects of community relations in Moss Vale during the depression. Firstly, there was a clear difference between ‘community’ work and ‘Council’ work. While the park was a community project, road works were clearly seen as a Council responsibility. Given that these men would have been entitled to basically the same amount of money if they had chosen not to work, it seems reasonable that they wished to be consulted about the work they were to do. They would probably have been quite happy to work on the roads but, as it meant providing ‘free’ labour to the Council instead of the community, they felt they should have been consulted. The fact that the unemployed felt that they were able to make demands is also significant. At the height of the depression one might assume that the unemployed were a powerless group and would be happy to take whatever work they could find. Yet clearly this was not the case and Moss Vale was not unique in this regard as there were numerous local protests by groups of unemployed people across the country. The protests in Moss Vale were relatively calm compared to some that had occurred on the South Coast a few months before. On 11 and
12 July, 1931, in a protest that came to known as the ‘South Coast Dole Riots,’ a large number of men picketed the dole in Wollongong, Scarborough and Port Kembla. When the police attempted to break these pickets, there was some violence and a number of arrests were made. 19

The structure and makeup of the unemployed groups in Moss Vale is unclear. Newspaper reports throughout the period refer to the leadership of the group but there does not appear to have been a formal union-like structure. Mass action was continually in the form of town meetings such as that mentioned above. The leaders of the unemployed group appear to have had far more frequent personal contact with the towns middle class leadership such as Paine and South. It seems likely that the basis for such personal contacts may have been through common involvement in church groups with common membership of the Methodist church being particularly evident.

The make up of the workers in the district was particularly mixed. At the time the district was primarily a farming area with an emphasis on dairying and livestock production. Following the 1914–1918 war the district was developing rapidly and many men were employed in the construction of new roads and other infrastructure such as sale yards. The town of Moss Vale itself had been established as a railway town and railway construction work was important at the time with the ongoing construction of the Moss Vale – Unanderra (Port Kembla) line. Quarrying was also an important industry in the district and cement works had been established near the village of Berrima. Importantly there were no dominant or largescale employers. This mix of workers is quite different to that of the nearby Illawarra area which was dominated by the coal mines and developing heavy industries. While in the Illawarra the industrial unions continued to represent the unemployed, in the Moss Vale district the unemployed gathered in town meetings that had nothing to do with workplace. Residency in the district seems to have been more important both in terms of identity and organisation than occupation or workplace. This must at least partially explain the relatively calm relations between the unemployed and town leaders compared to what was happening on the coast. The unemployed of the Moss Vale district negotiated through community structures and did not adopt the separatist and potentially confrontational forms of the trades unions.

The unemployed did not have the organisational power of the trade unions, they had nothing to sell or withhold and they were in the socially embarrassing situation of accepting charity. Nevertheless the unemployed not only felt that they could protest, their protests had some success; the provision of relief work by local councils and finally by the State Government being the most obvious examples. The most reasonable explanation for the successful exercise of this political influence is that the unemployed were members of the community, and that community had a shared belief in a right to work.

In 1933 the New South Wales Government put in place a centrally organised system of unemployment relief that worked very much like the scheme that had been used in Moss Vale in 1931. Economic historians have argued that relief work did little to help pull Australia out of the depression. 20 The Moss Vale scheme, however, was never intended to do so. The scheme was primarily about solving a conflict between community values and social and economic realities. The solution to this conflict was found in the memory of the local community. The scheme is an excellent example of shared ideals leading to social and political action. Through the political power enjoyed by the unemployed, it also demonstrates the power that can be gained through belonging to a community.

Endnotes

1 Snooks, G., Robbing Peter to Pay Paul: Australian unemployment relief in the thirties, Working paper on economic history number 41, Australian National University, 1985 This central system was similar to the Moss Vale Scheme of 1931.
2 Scrutineer, 28 February, 1931.
3 Moss Vale Municipal Council Minutes, 10 November, 1931.
5 Moss Vale Post, 6 May, 1930.
6 Scrutineer, 10 May, 1930.
7 Moss Vale Post, 13 May, 1930.
8 Southern Mail, 13 March, 1931.
9 The plan is outlined in the Moss Vale Municipal Council Minutes, 3 March, 1931. It is not reported in the papers until after the meeting with cabinet, and even then, not clearly.
10 Scrutineer, 26 March, 1931.
11 Moss Vale Post, 12 July, 1929.
12 Scrutineer, 18 April, 1931.
13 Moss Vale Post, 22 May, 1931.
14 Wingecarribee Shire Council Minute Book, 8 May, 1931.
16 Pay scale determined the number of days work a man was entitled to and was determined by the number of dependents he had.
17 Scrutineer 24 October, 1931
20 Snooks, op cit.