Sitting on the rail: The Westralian Worker’s response to wartime issues

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Sitting on the Rail

The *Westralian Worker*'s response to wartime issues

Robert Corr

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Abstract

The *Westralian Worker* occupies a privileged place in Western Australia's labour history, as the working class movement's official organ. This study seeks to understand how the paper dealt with its conflicting roles as reflector and projector of labour movement opinion—the observer-agent dichotomy. It does so by analysing the *Worker*'s response to some of the major issues facing labour during World War I. The peace movement, anti-German attitudes, the persecution of the IWW, and the conscription debates are considered. It will be argued that the *Worker* attempted to accommodate a wide range of views, but as organised labour's divisions grew deeper, this position became untenable; ultimately the *Westralian Worker* was captured by the anti-conscriptionists.
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Chapter one

Introduction

To the workers of Western Australia, greeting. We have arrived.

It was with this enthusiastic confidence that the Westralian Worker announced itself to the world on 7 September 1900. And why not? The formation of Labor parties around Australia offered tremendous hope to the labour movement, and the labour press saw itself as an essential new feature of the changing political landscape.\(^1\) It was the “why and the wherefore of our existence”, explained that first editorial, “to so mould public opinion that the irresistible impulse will be to sweep away all obstacles to proved and desirable reforms.” The Worker saw itself as the voice of the working Western Australian, challenging the “gigantic and flourishing commercial concerns” that inevitably used their power and influence to oppose the efforts of the labour movement. This new paper was different: “we would say that this paper belongs to the workers, is run in their interests, [and] is dependent on their support”.\(^2\)

Its clear links to organised labour have given the Westralian Worker a privileged position in relation to the attention of labour historians. Andrew Gill noted its paradoxical existence as both a familiar and altogether unknown institution. “In research on the early labour movement in Western Australia,” he wrote, “few sources have been so frequently cited as the Westralian Worker”; yet there exist only “brief skeletal references to its

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\(^1\) The Westralian Worker referred only to the “Labor movement”, effectively ignoring unaffiliated trade unions and other groups, like the Industrial Workers of the World. I prefer a more inclusive approach: Throughout this paper, the term “Labor” refers to the Australian Labor Federation, while “labour” refers to the entire working class movement.

\(^2\) Westralian Worker (hereafter WW), 7 September 1900, p4.
organisation and its editors, most of which come from the pen of the late Jim Gibney.”

While Gill’s article adds significantly to our knowledge the paper’s early years in Kalgoorlie (1900-1912), little else has been written about its vital role in the WA labour movement.3

A notable exception to this silence is the period of John Curtin’s editorship from early 1917 to 1928. Natural biographical interest in a prime minister has meant various snippets about the Westralian Worker have been published; however their focus has been on the man and not the paper. The countless editorials written by Curtin during that period have provided abundant material for analysis of Curtin’s ideological drift from idealistic anti-war revolutionary to pragmatic wartime leader. David Black’s In His Own Words and Dianne Sholl’s thesis, “John Curtin at the Westralian Worker: 1917-1924”, fall into this category.4 David Day’s recent biography, John Curtin: A Life, is far more useful. Its exposition of the forces at play behind Curtin’s appointment as editor, for example, illuminates somewhat the newspaper’s links to the labour movement.5

Likewise, Day’s account of a dispute between Curtin and Tom Walsh of the Seaman’s Union, in which Curtin refused to publish an article critical of the Labor government, reveals that while the labour press claims to be the voice of the workingman, it does not merely reflect the views of the labour movement. In seeking to shape public opinion, the

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Westralian Worker, like its capitalistic counterparts, needed to silence certain dissenting elements.\(^6\)

In calling for further research on the labour press, H.J. Gibbney warned about this phenomenon. “Historians are prone to generalise about the state of public opinion from material published in newspapers”, he observed; however, “few historians know anything of the people who composed this material, a fact that sometimes throws doubt on the generalisations.”\(^7\) Given that the pages of the Westralian Worker are regarded as an accurate barometer of labour movement opinion, incidents such as that described by Day are causes for concern. To what extent did the Worker push the views of one labour faction to the detriment of others? Jon Bekken showed that the Chicago labour press was openly factional, with the progressive Chicago Labor Federation and its newspaper, The New Majority, coming “under increasingly vitriolic attack from the conservatives and their organ, the independent, employer-supported ‘labor’ paper The Unionist.”\(^8\) Australia was no different, Terry Irving argues, and “[e]very political tendency in the movement felt that it could not exist without a periodical; indeed, producing and selling the paper was for some socialist groups their only sign of life”.\(^9\) Such publications are so clearly sectional that they are unlikely to form the basis for any movement-wide generalisation.

\(^6\) Day, D. *John Curtin*, pp290-293.
But the *Westralian Worker* was different. It was one of those newspapers Irving regards as “[m]ost ambitious of all”: it “sought to speak for the whole labor movement.”  

The tension in its editorial policy is encapsulated by a report written in early 1914 about the “capitalistic press” and labour’s internal arguments:

**LABOR’S LITTLE DIVISIONS.**

No exception is made by the capitalistic press in the case of the Metropolitan Council. The writer has regularly attended the meetings of that body and gone to great pains to give a careful summary of the work transacted. Members of that Council are only human, and when personalities are occasionally resorted to he has felt it no part of his business to blazon that fact to the world. ... Differences of opinion exist among all parties and are not unknown even among the bodies which govern churches. These differences make for progress, and any body which does not have them is hopelessly stuck in the mud of reaction. More than this, differences of opinion, when not carried out into the highways and byways in a spirit of bitterness, inevitably make for solidarity.  

In one paragraph, the writer praises “differences of opinion” within the labour movement, and admits that his “careful summary” of Metropolitan Council meetings deliberately excludes details of heated debate. The result is that those issues which demonstrate the vitality of the labour movement are glossed over, leaving us with a false representation of the movement’s unanimity on issues. Most troubling is the fact that minority opinions, despite preventing labour from sinking into “the mud of reaction”, might be forgotten entirely.

The need for further investigation of the *Westralian Worker*’s operation is therefore clear. This dissertation seeks to begin that process. I propose to take a different approach to Gibbney and Gill’s illumination of the characters involved in “running the rag”; instead, I

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10 Irving, T. “Remembering the Labor Press.”
11 *WW*, 16 January 1914, p.2.
will investigate the interaction between the Worker's contradictory functions as both reflector and projector of the labour movement's opinions by considering the role it played during the tumult of the First World War (1914-1918). This was a period during which tensions in the labour movement were brought to a head, after slowly building up over such issues as Australia's involvement in an imperial war, the discriminatory and often violent treatment of "enemy aliens", and the suppression of the radical union, the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). The movement experienced tremendous upheaval on the issue of conscription for overseas military service, culminating in the expulsion of pro-conscription members of parliament from the Labor party. The dynamics of the labour movement were significantly altered by this development, with the majority uniting against the "rat", W.M. Hughes, and his Nationalist government. However, differences remained during the second conscription plebiscite, and indeed beyond the end of the war. Following a brief exposition of the labour movement's contours during the period of the Great War, this paper will examine the Westralian Worker's response to these debates and attempt to explain its position in relation to each.

**Background and context**

The overwhelming consensus is that Australians were willing—even eager—participants in the Great War. Robin Gollan writes that a "few dissidents—pacifists, left-wing socialists and members of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW)—opposed involvement in the war from the beginning, but the general reaction was the Australians must be there to 'do their bit'".  

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war can be garnered from the rush to enlist. Writing of the eastern states, Ian Turner notes that “[t]rade union members were quick to flock to the colours… of the 54 000 recruits who enlisted in the first five months of the war, 43 per cent were unionists—well above the proportion of unionists among adult males.”\textsuperscript{13} It was only later, when “the price the war was extracting gradually became evident, the early enthusiasms gave way to weariness and the community divided on many matters connected with the war—divisions which lasted to the end of the war and afterwards.”\textsuperscript{14} Malcolm Saunders and Ralph Summy contend that the divisions that appeared during the war were due to latent divisions in Australian society, and point to the existence of “a continuous Australian peace movement [dating] from the Second or Great Boer War of 1899-1902” as evidence. While its numbers were undoubtedly small, “the Australian peace movement on a per capita basis … exceeded the strength of its counterparts in Britain, the United States, Canada, and on the continent of Europe.”\textsuperscript{15}

The most comprehensive study of the Western Australian home front during World War I is presented by Bobbie Oliver in her \textit{War and Peace in Western Australia: The Social and Political Impact of the Great War 1914-1926}.\textsuperscript{16} Oliver rejects the notion of “a peculiarly Western Australian consensus” and charges that, “by their uncritical acceptance of consensus as the dominant social and political characteristic, some historians have misinterpreted major events in Western Australian history.” To Oliver, wartime society

\textsuperscript{14} Gollan, R. \textit{Revolutionaries and Reformists}, p1.
was divided by ideology, gender, race, nationality and, most bitterly of all, class. A vivid picture of the entrenched class structure is painted by, for example, her juxtaposition of Neil McNeil’s “grand home”—it “overlooked a fine sweep of lawn and some of Perth’s most beautiful river views at Peppermint Grove”—with the “fetid dens” that the workers of Fremantle called home, such as Mouat Street’s “cow yard’, where six houses were served by only one tap and one sanitary convenience.” This was a society in which the labour movement, with its calls for higher wages and improved living conditions, offered some obvious attractions.  

The question, of course, was how to achieve those aims. If Western Australia was anything like the rest of the country, it would be hopelessly divided. Manning Clark captures the conflict of personalities and parties, means and ends:

Andrew Fisher, William Morris Hughes, King O’Malley and their colleagues in the labour movement did not know what line they would take. Fisher and Hughes repeated their preference for “practical measures”; Frank Anstey talked about “democratic socialism”; the members of the Australian Socialist Party reiterated their view that the Australian Labor Party was a bourgeois party; the followers of the Industrial Workers of the World called for the cleansing fire of revolution, promising that a new and more beautiful society would rise like a phoenix from the ashes of the old.  

Writing over forty years ago, J.R. Robertson proposed that WA did not suffer from this confusion. Instead, the years of the Scaddan Labor government (1911-1916) were characterised by overwhelming agreement on aims and methods: “The relationship between the Parliamentary and non-Parliamentary section of the labour movement during Scaddan’s Premiership was founded on a general belief in both the advisability and the efficacy of political action.” Even the controversy “on which the government fell” was

17 Oliver, B. War and Peace in Western Australia, p17, p39.
dealt with by "a marked demonstration of labour unity". 19 Robertson's labour movement is one that operates by consensus.

Like the consensus theory applied by various historians to WA society at large, Robertson's theory is challenged by Oliver's account. Far from being opposed to industrial methods, the Western Australian labour movement was quite willing to act, and "industrial strife remained a feature of Western Australian life". 20 Debate about the Labor party's objectives and methods was not settled, and the Australian Labor Federation (ALF) exhibited splendid diversity:

>The ideology of leading members of the ALF was never uniformly moderate at any time during the period of 1914-1926. While outspoken in his attempts to gain reforms for his fellow workers, Alexander McCallum tended to place his faith in the more moderate methods of arbitration and political action, whereas his colleague, Don Cameron, strongly favoured socialist objectives. Philip Collier was initially a militant, but his ideology became increasingly moderate after the war. 21

Robertson's willingness to gloss over important elements of the extra-parliamentary labour movement is disappointing. While it is true that in the first twenty years of the twentieth century "at least five organisations intended to embrace socialists were formed, flourished for a few months or years, and then, as enthusiasm waned, disappeared", it is also true that their influence extended beyond their membership; they placed a strong emphasis on their educational and propaganda functions. Furthermore, Robertson's description of "the weakness of the spirit of revolutionary socialism" is itself weakened by its neglect of the Industrial Workers of the World. The IWW experienced their hey-

20 Oliver, B. War and Peace in Western Australia, p48.
21 Oliver, B. War and Peace in Western Australia, p49.
day during the First World War due, at least in part, to dissatisfaction with the Scaddan Government.²²

Frank Cain’s *The Wobblies at War* shows that the spread of IWWism was rapid in Australia.²³ The De Leonist branches established by the Socialist Labor Party did not last long; the Australian Socialist Party sponsored the introduction of Chicago-style Locals which, by the start of the Great War, had “totally eclipsed” the more moderate clubs. The Chicago Wobblies were in favour of direct action. “Briefly, this meant that IWW unions had to confront the employers and demand improved conditions and not plan for some vague long-term goal through political action.” The Western Australian Locals battled against the “politically conservative” and “strongly Anglophile” society, and focussed their attention on those who could not join the exclusionist craft unions – migrants “from other Australian states or from other parts of the world such as Italy, Sweden or what was later to become Yugoslavia.” Despite WA’s isolation, the IWW here maintained strong links with its national and international comrades, for example by importing foreign-language pamphlets. Prominent local Wobbly Mick Sawtell also made regular contributions to the Sydney-based IWW paper, *Direct Action*. Western Australian IWWism was dependent upon a core of committed leaders, formed by Sawtell, Charles Reeve, Monty Miller and others. With the “firm support” of the Sydney Local and the

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²² Robertson, J.R. “The Internal Politics of State Labor in Western Australia, 1911-1916, pp51-52.
help of its organiser-for-hire J.B. King, the IWW in WA “made small but rapid progress”.  

“A Flower that Refused to Bloom” significantly expands on the sketch provided by Cain. Felicity Mitchell reveals that while the life span of the IWW in Western Australia was short, it was an organisation that left a lasting mark on Western Australian society. She presents “ample evidence that, though the Wobbly organisation collapsed even before the pressure of persecution and prosecution, the spirit of direct action and militancy lived on.” Verity Burgmann shares this view, writing that “although the IWW was organisationally decrepit in 1918, it appears that ‘IWWism’, that body of ideas bequeathed to the working class, still caused alarm in official circles.” In other words, the ideas of the IWW spread far beyond its small membership. The Western Australian Locals, particularly Boulder, experienced tremendous structural difficulties. For example, while it provided a more receptive audience, “[t]he inclusive policy of representing migrant and itinerant workers exacerbated problems of distance and communication as well as raising the suspicions of authorities in regard to enemy aliens in time of war.”  

The true extent of labour movement support for the program and activities of the IWW in WA remains unclear. Nonetheless, it will be instructive to consider the treatment by the Westralian Worker of a vocal minority of the labour movement suffering under the full weight of the state’s pressure.

24 Cain, F. The Wobblies at War, p15, p40, pp146-148.
28 Mitchell, F. “A Flower that Refused to Bloom”, p27.
The Wobblies were not the only group to experience persecution during the First World War. Oliver describes at length the campaign against so-called “enemy aliens”, which was particularly harsh in Western Australia. Some indication of this is offered by the “disproportionately large numbers of ‘aliens’” locked in concentration camps by the Labor government. “Incredibly, 21 per cent of the internees at Liverpool, New South Wales, where a mass concentration camp had been set up, came from Western Australia, despite the fact that only 5 per cent of the State’s population was German or Austrian born.” Oliver presents the Scaddan government as walking the fine line between taking necessary precautions and respecting the rights of innocents. She “senses an attempt by the Western Australian Government to protect the aliens themselves, as well as the rest of the community.” This is supported by Scaddan’s initial refusal to yield to the hysterical lobbying of the All-British Association (ABA). Nonetheless, “By early 1916, Scaddan had abandoned all attempts to protect German-born government employees from persecution.”

There was a clear division in the labour movement on this issue. There were those, like Scaddan, who saw German-Australians and their offspring as loyal Western Australians—he “pointed out that sons of naturalised Germans were fighting at the front”—and there were others who considered them enemies by birth and blood. For example, the militant ABA was partly drawn from the ranks of the working class movement, and their views “aligned them ideologically with the conservative Labor politicians” who followed Billy Hughes out of the party. However their beliefs were not

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29 Oliver, B. *War and Peace in Western Australia*, p64, p66, p74.
30 Oliver, B. *War and Peace in Western Australia*, p72.
shared by everyone in the movement, and even the pro-conscription editor of the
Westralian Worker, John Hilton, was prepared to stand up in court to defend the “alien”
anarchist Willem Siebenhaar against charges of disloyalty.31

As the war progressed, its economic consequences were felt at home. Ted Joll describes
the period from 1914 to 1918 as “a time of commercial stagnation”. “Staff reductions
because of heavy enlistments, shipping shortages, a drop in gold output and a sever
drought in 1914 were some of the major causes. Timber exports declined badly and pearl-
shell prices collapsed”. This led to scapegoating and “businessmen with German origins,
such as the Streliz brothers, often had to suffer indignities and hardships. Even a name
that sounded vaguely ‘un-Allied’ was enough to invite damage to shopfronts.”32 For
those without access to capital, the consequences were even more severe. Despite great
effort and significant personal sacrifice, Scaddan’s administration failed to stem the rising
unemployment rate. Oliver notes that this gave traction to the xenophobic ideas of the
ABA—“foreigners” were seen to be keeping “Britishers” out of work. “Destitution was
often caused by unionists refusing to work with men whom they regarded as aliens,
irrespective of whether these men had been granted work permits by the military
authorities.” These “divisions among fellow workers” led to many migrants surrendering
themselves to detention as aliens, in order to secure a “meagre subsistence allowance” for
their families.33

33 Oliver, B. *War and Peace in Western Australia*, p68, p76.
The dispute over the desirability of conscription for overseas military service was the most visible indication of the widening rift in the labour movement. Consequently, it is also the most comprehensively analysed debate of the period. J.R. Robertson attempts to apply his consensus theory, arguing that “Western Australian Labor’s attempt to cope with this catastrophe was framed in the tradition of moderation”.

34 He suggests that the Australian Labor Federation went to great lengths to avoid expressly condemning conscription; indeed, the party’s eventual split in WA was ostensibly over the decision of some Labor MPs to support the Hughes Nationalist government, rather than over conscription itself. However, this is a disingenuous explanation of events, resting as it does on the results of votes and not the machinations behind them. P.B. Williams is more convincing in his essay, “Conscription and the ALP: Observations on the 1916 Congress.” He argues that the rank-and-file—as represented through the Fremantle, Midland and Metropolitan District Councils—“while not inclined to support the conscription of life were very interested in the counterpart, conscription of wealth.” It was some time before the senior decision-making bodies engaged themselves in the debate.

35 Robertson, J.R. “The Internal Politics of State Labor in Western Australia, 1911-1916”, p74.

The issue was eventually raised at the 1916 Congress. While Robertson played down the diversity of opinions at the Congress, Williams noticed significant behind-the-scenes manoeuvring as the pro-conscriptionists attempted to save face. As they “were unable to
gain support for their position it was necessary to block [Don] Cameron’s [anti-conscription] motion.” They offered an amendment characterised by “deliberate vagueness” in order to “maximise their vote, while blocking the Cameron motion.” They succeeded in their aim but it was a pyrrhic victory, reflecting more the conscriptionists’ number-crunching ability than the genuine sentiment of the labour movement. Williams suggests that “At the most only 24 delegates believed that the conscription of life could be required”. Oliver’s brief mention of the Congress supports Williams’ interpretation, citing the disproportionate time spent on the debate. While conscription was “only one of 221 items tabled for discussion…, the amount of time devoted to the issue indicates that it was already deeply divisive.”

Divisions in the extra-parliamentary sections of the labour movement were also plainly evident. One group in support of conscription was the All-British Association, while in opposition the “Anti-Conscription League (ACL) was formed, with Don Cameron as President and Tom Butler as Secretary. Harry Leighton, an IWW member, and Andrew Clementson also held offices in the organisation.” However “the ACL made little headway, even within the labour movement”. In fairness, their campaign was hindered by a well-organised pro-conscription lobby, which had the resources of the state, the churches, business and conservative labour leaders at its disposal. The labour newspaper’s editor, John Hilton, was in favour of conscription, although he “encouraged debate by throwing open the Westralian Worker’s columns for the free expression of

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39 Oliver, B. War and Peace in Western Australia, pp92-93.
40 Oliver, B. War and Peace in Western Australia, p95.
41 Oliver, B. War and Peace in Western Australia, p96.
opinions on both sides." This may have been to differentiate his product from the strongly pro-conscription capitalist press, but it also indicates his reluctance to censor a strong current within the labour movement. The nature of this free discussion and the motives behind it will be discussed at length later.

Western Australia’s high vote in favour of conscription has resulted in some analysis of its unique situation, and various factors have been canvassed as possible contributors to the result. The failure of the ALF to make an unequivocal stand against conscription almost certainly was a factor. Oliver contends that “[t]he results of the 1916 referendum ... were indicative of a society in which conservative power structures were strongly entrenched and well organized. Unlike Labor, the conservatives appear to have been completely united in their support of conscription.” While “[t]he majority of the State ALF hoped for a reconciliation now that the conscription referendum had failed”, influential anti-conscriptionists Alex McCallum and Don Cameron determined to “rid the Labor movement of pro-conscriptionists.” The defection of Prime Minister Hughes and twenty-three Labor members provided the anti-conscriptionists with a pretext for recriminations. Cameron launched a campaign against Senator Paddy Lynch and WA Opposition Leader John Scaddan, who were charged with having made remarks constituting treason against the labour movement. The debate was so heated that fisticuffs broke out in a meeting of the Eastern Goldfields District Council. While opposition to conscription was not sufficient grounds for expulsion, a Special Congress held in March 1917 considered that by joining the Nationalist Party, Labor MPs had put themselves

42 Oliver, B. War and Peace in Western Australia, p101.
outside the labour movement. This suggests that the schism in WA was deep—the anti-
conscriptionists went to great lengths to ensure their future dominance of the party.\textsuperscript{44}

It was not only numbers within the ALF that the anti-conscriptionists were fighting to
maintain. At the same time they were struggling, to borrow a modern phrase, to win the
hearts and minds of the labour movement. However, if the rank and file were to be
reached it would require a different approach, and to that end extensive lobbying was
conducted to install the prominent Victorian campaigner John Curtin as editor of the
\textit{Westralian Worker}. Among those who pushed for Curtin’s appointment were Hugh
Mahon MP, who had begun to oppose conscription when Billy Hughes ran a sectarian
campaign; Monty O’Dowd; Joe Swebleses; Don Cameron; Frank Anstey; and Alexander
McCallum. From this point there is no question about the paper’s propaganda role:
“Curtin had come to change the political environment of the State”, and he immediately
used the pages of the \textit{Worker} to argue for the expulsion of the Nationalists.\textsuperscript{45} His active
role in the campaign against the second conscription plebiscite almost certainly
contributed to Western Australia’s reduced Yes majority. Curtin’s editorship of the
\textit{Westralian Worker} has been discussed at length elsewhere, but this dissertation will
consider the reasons for his appointment.\textsuperscript{46}

Wartime Western Australia was deeply and bitterly divided, and much of the cleavage
visible in broader society impacted on the labour movement, too. It was a period of
dramatic turbulence, involving vigorous debates, exciting personalities and, ultimately, a

\textsuperscript{44} Oliver, B. \textit{War and Peace in Western Australia}, p94, pp106-109.
\textsuperscript{46} See Black, D. \textit{In His Own Words}; Sholl, D. “John Curtin at the Westralian Worker.”
split. The *Westralian Worker* recorded these events, but did not stand idly by. It was both a reporter and a participant; it sought both to reflect and to project the labour movement’s opinions. It is imperative that we bring this observer-agent dichotomy into sharper relief.
Chapter two

Sitting on the rail?

The Great War broke out in Europe on Tuesday, 4 August 1914. The Westralian Worker of the following Friday was underwhelming in its response. The front page advertised details of its Picture Puzzle Competition, in which a prize of £1 was offered to the first person to correctly identify four Laborite caricatures, and the next few pages were dominated by advertisements for everything from Vidatio ("The Medicine that Cures") to Braham Bros. dentists. Workers eager to hear of the latest developments in Europe would have to wait until page six, where they would be greeted (at last) by a banner reading:

EUROPE IS AT WAR
— BUT —
FOY & GIBSON’S Prices Remain Unchanged.

This procession of trivialities contrasted strongly with a cartoon published in that issue. Captioned "WAR!!! The ‘Worker’ Apprentice Reads the News", it depicted a shocked young man, "W.A.", reading a Special Edition newspaper as the "European War" exploded around him.\(^1\)

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\(^1\) *WW*, 7 August 1914. Technical issues go some way to explaining the Westralian Worker’s lethargic response. The demands of contemporary machinery caused a lag between a story reaching Western Australia and its publication. Nonetheless, the *Worker* appears to have made little effort to prioritise what was, after all, the biggest news story it had ever reported.

\(^2\) *WW* 7 August 1914, p12.
Figure 1. Newspapers were a vital connection between the home front and the fighting front. The *Westralian Worker*, though, initially focussed on important local issues rather than the excitement of the war. (*WW*, 7 August 1914, p12.)

If this was the *Worker*'s Special War Edition, it certainly did not convey the explosive action hinted at by the cartoon. Indeed the nearest it came to such excitement was an account of the "Scene at Perth Drill Hall", where the members of A Company of the 88th Infantry had been mustered on 5 August. It reported that "for the most part they [the men]
were taking it as a very ordinary everyday affair, and there was no evidence of excitement, anxiety, or elation." Readers would no doubt have been interested to learn that the infantrymen's equipment included "2 pairs Underpants, 2 pairs Socks, 2 Flannel shirts" and "1 Field service hat". These details seem mundane in retrospect, but they must have satisfied the desire of Western Australian readers, 15 000 miles from Europe, to feel as if they were a part of the conflict.

The report also mentioned that "Some question was raised as to whether voting facilities would be given to men in camp on election day". This offers some insight into a movement that was preoccupied with the Federal elections, which were to be held in less than a month's time. The prospect of a large bloc of Labor voters being disenfranchised by their enlistment worried labour activists. D.W. Clarson, on behalf of the Bellevue branch of the ALF, wrote to the Midland District Council "urging that voting facilities be secured for Expeditionary Force at Greenmount." E.E. Heitmann later wrote asking that the men "be looked after re voting at State elections."4

This focus on immediate practical considerations is also reflected in the urgency with which the potential for increases in the cost of living was reported. There was an article warning "that if traders are allowed to put up prices at their own sweet will, an intolerable position will quickly be created and the Governments, Federal and State, will be compelled to take action". In an addendum headed "Thursday, 12:30 p.m.", the paper assured readers that "We understand on the best authority that the State Government has

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3 WW 7 August 1914, p6.
4 Midland District Council minutes, 27 August 1914; 10 September 1914. Battye Library Private Archives Acc994A/1.
under consideration the question of safeguarding the interests of the community with regard to the rise of prices in food stuffs, and will take action in this regard." The time stamp suggested to readers that this was breaking news added just before going to press, but the article proper had noted the same assurances made by Members of Parliament at the State Executive meeting on the previous Tuesday night. Clearly, the Worker was not shy of using sensationalist techniques to excite its readers, creating an exaggerated sense of urgency.  

At the same time, the first wartime editorial set out the framework within which the paper would operate during the war. It attempted to straddle two diametrically opposed currents which existed within the labour movement: firstly, that wars are for the benefit of capital, have a tremendous negative impact on the working classes, and therefore should not be supported; and secondly, that when the motherland called upon the Empire for assistance, it was the duty of the colonies to respond. Thus:

Bishop Riley last Sunday expressed the hope that the International Congress of Workmen would have had some effect in stopping war; from financial institutions he had no hope—finance was not moved by pity—but from the workers, who suffered most by war, he had had hope. The workers unfortunately are not yet sufficiently organised, but the present conflict should have the effect of welding them into one solid body. From them alone can any hope for the future come, for finance is ruthless in its operations and cruel as the grave.

Australia’s duty in the crisis is clear. She must defend her heritage and also do her best to assist the mother country in her hour of need. Britain has been drawn into the conflict with the greatest reluctance; by her desire to preserve the independence of Belgium and by her invincible determination not to stand idly by while French towns and ships contiguous to her Southern shores are ruthlessly bombarded.  

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5 WW 7 August 1914, p6.
6 WW, 7 August 1914, p6.
Bishop Riley’s sermon referred to a resolution of the Second International calling for an international general strike in order to prevent or halt military conflict. It was known as “war against war”, and the Victorian Socialist Party sent a circular to Western Australian organisations in an attempt to gauge their support for the International’s recommendation. The *Worker* reported that the circular was read at a meeting of the Eastern Goldfields District Council; a week later the State Executive resolved to pass the information on to the district councils, but there is no record of their response.7

Any support for the plan appears to have dissipated quickly once fighting got under way. On 4 August, the day war was declared, the Fremantle Trades Hall Association passed a resolution “calling upon the workers of the world to take no part in the present international crisis.” In response, W.H. Carpenter MLA wrote “that he could not possibly continue to be a delegate to the association while such a resolution remained on its records.” His letter was applauded by some delegates, and “considerable discussion” and “[s]tirring speeches” followed. At a special meeting convened to discuss the issue, the motion was expunged from the minutes by a landslide vote of 42 to 2.8 This remarkable turnaround indicates that the WA socialists were opportunistic enough to pass resolutions that were overwhelmingly opposed by the rest of the labour movement, if they found they had the numbers at a meeting.

It also shows that the Western Australian labour movement was prepared to set aside high ideals if it considered that circumstances required it, a point that is reflected in the

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7 *WW*, 15 May 1914, p10; 22 May 1914, p6.
8 *WW*, 21 August 1914, p8; 4 September 1914, p4.
Westralian Worker's editorial position. On 4 September 1914 the juxtaposition between the ideal and the practical was marked:

Viewed in the abstract Labor is opposed to all war, believing that such a method of settling international disputes is savage and barbarous to the last degree... But while it has such high aspirations, Labor clearly recognises the serious nature of the problem which confronts just now... The whole resources of the Empire must be thrown into the conflict. Neither Britain nor France is faultless, but they are fighting to-day against the ruthless violation of Belgian territory, for the preservation of free institutions, and against domination by a military caste drunk with lust of blood and military domination.9

This schizophrenic position was challenged by various socialist operatives. Lilian Foxcroft's criticism was scathing:

[The] call to the "Workers of the World to unite" is not answered by those workers who have volunteered to murder their brothers or buy [sic] those who are fanning the war fever by declaring loudly that this is a war of democracy against autocracy, conveniently forgetting that one of the combatants on the democratic side is Russia, which country can scarcely be held up as an example of democracy. [...] I accuse the "Worker" of taking a cowardly and vacillating policy on this question. It has made no definite pronouncement on the situation, neither one way nor the other (certainly there is no immediate danger of its office being wrecked), and is just "sitting on the rail," except that it has, along with the political leaders of the party, entered into the unedifying wrangle with the Liberals as to whom should have the credit of having bought the death machines and initiated the defence scheme.10

The editor would occasionally respond briefly to a correspondent, usually in a brief few sentences. In this case, the Worker's response was significantly longer than Foxcroft's letter, indicating its sensitivity to such criticism. It was a shallow response, amounting to little more than a string of clichés: "We believe that the triumph of the German war party would put back the clock of civilisation, and substituted the rule of the sword for the verdict of the ballot-box. England could no more have stood idly while the Germans were overrunning Belgium than she could have remained inactive at the time when Napoleon

9 WW, 4 September 1914, p4.  
10 WW, 18 September 1914, p3.
was drenching Europe with blood.” Russia’s faults were brushed aside as mere peccadillos, with the hope “that the present war will bring a larger measure of freedom, not merely to the Poles, but to the whole of the Russian people.” It even stooped to a bizarre personal attack: “It is somewhat amusing to hear such a strong condemnation of militarism from such a militant suffragette as Mrs. Foxcroft.”

This amusement might have turned to astonishment as it became clear that many other suffragettes shared Foxcroft’s views. The women of the movement took a leading role in opposing Labor’s support for the war effort. In early 1915, an interesting exchange appeared. Julian Stuart of Cottesloe wrote expressing an opinion similar to that of the Worker: “I regard militarism as one of the greatest curses that has ever blighted the world, [but] I am a supporter of Prime Minister Fisher’s policy that the last Australian and the last Australian penny should be made available”. A week later, a response from Florence Stuart, Julian’s wife, was published in which she demonstrated her outright contempt for politicians who professed high ideals and yet joined the war.

Your correspondent Julian Stuart [she wrote] has in my opinion advanced no arguments of weight against the attitude of those critics of Andrew Fisher’s policy… It is to me a saddening spectacle to see individuals who have given a life-time of whole-hearted self-sacrifice in the workers’ cause gulled by the specious clap-trap of gaudy politicians of the Andrew Fisher and George Pearce type, or that they should for one moment give their approval to Australia’s participation in this unholy capitalistic conspiracy, this war which, as one Australian writer has said, “Is a shuddering blasphemy.”

This heartfelt tirade struck a chord, and Mrs H.C. Josephine Hansen considered that “[t]he fearless stand taken by her [Florence Stuart] in denouncing this war for what it really is—‘Everything that is vile and unholy’—should appeal to every thinking woman

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11 *WW*, 18 September 1914, p3.
12 *WW*, 5 February 1915, p5.
13 *WW*, 12 February 1915, p2.
worker that has had the opportunity of reading it.” She called upon the women of the labour movement to “rally one and all behind those fearless outspoken ones, ... that little band who are brave enough to declare what war and all its results really are, quite regardless of what the crowd will say or think of them.” On 12 March, Olive E. Neal joined the “little band”, claiming that their views “are but an echo of the sentiment of every woman who has enough intelligence to think for herself”.14

The difficulties encountered by the Worker in defending its editorial position resulted from the labour movement’s decision to allow the immediate demands of Empire to overturn longstanding labour tradition. Most Australians considered themselves “Britishers” first and Australians second, particularly in Western Australia which had a higher proportion of British-born residents than elsewhere in the nation. The sense of duty to the “motherland” was therefore strong, and national heritage trumped international labour solidarity. A contribution from Annie Bessant indicates the awe in which most Western Australians held their former home: Britain was “knight errant of liberty, servant of duty”, preferring “liberty, honor, justice, law, better than life or treasure,” and “[f]or this, the nations bless her; for this her dying sons adore her, for this shall the world-Empire be hers with the consent of all free peoples, and she shall be the protector, not the tyrant, of humanity.”15

Occasionally the paper’s idealism would break through this sentimental patriotism, such as on Christmas Eve, 1914. It took an uncharacteristically balanced approach, noting that

14 WW, 5 March 1915, p3; 12 March 1915, p2.
15 WW, 8 January 1915, p3.
both sides blamed each other for the conflict and calling on labour to stand firm in its peaceful convictions:

While the professing Christians of the British Empire are declaring that the war has only been embarked upon as a dire necessity against wrong-doers, the professing Christians of Germany are taking up a remarkably similar view. The vast majority of the professing Christians of both these great lands have given the war their benison, despite the fact that they are ostensible followers of the Prince of Peace. Each nation professes to be certain that it is in the right, and the other in the wrong. […]

It may be broadly stated on behalf of the Labor movement that it believes in the existence of eternal principles of justice which cannot be bartered or bought or abrogated. Labor must continue anew with unabated vigor its international movement, and seek by this means to prove that it is in the best and highest interests of the peoples of the world to be brothers.\[16\]

For the most part, however, bartering, buying and abrogating eternal principles of justice was the Worker’s stock-in-trade. Occasional reminders that “the element of vindictiveness must be banished when the final terms [of peace] are discussed” were massively outweighed by passionate demands that “[t]his foul thing [German ‘frightfulness’] which has risen to scourge the earth must be obliterated at all cost”; it was insisted that “liberty could not exist on the earth while the Potsdam war party remained uncrushed”; the fighting “was necessary if Australia was to be saved from the rapine of the Hun and the rule of the Prussian drill sergeant.” One leading article went so far as to appropriate the peace movement’s slogan, claiming that the conflict was “a case of waging War against War, and civilisation is hoping that the Allies will soon secure a stranglehold on the hateful military caste in Prussia.”\[17\]

\[16\] WW, 24 December 1914, p4.
There is little doubt that these were the views of the majority of Western Australian workers. Rather than blame “the war” for the economic pressures faced by the State, the Midland District Council opted for more colourful language in its report on the year that was 1914: “Trade conditions were good in the first half of the year, and would have probably been the same in the second half, but for the drought, and the gentle methods of the German emperor to promote ‘culture’ by commencing a war that affected nearly every civilised nation.”\(^{18}\) The ALF’s General Secretary, J.A. Doland, and its General Secretary, Alex McCallum, in their annual report to the State Executive, spelled out WA Labor’s position. They considered that “it is too late now to discuss the causes of war”, but went on to say that “[t]he German war lords occupied the same position as a trainer who had spent much time and trouble in preparing his horse to race, … and was anxiously looking for the day when his strength could be tested before the agitation for the abolition of racing succeeded.” There was no question that this was Germany’s war, or that Australians must do their bit to overthrow the German military caste—“and we think it is useless to talk about ending the war until this is accomplished.” Nevertheless, the report’s tone was moderate and it seemed calculated to keep the peace movement satisfied with the official labour movement.\(^{19}\)

One need only read accounts of the departure of soldiers to gain a sense of the pride and admiration Western Australians felt for their valiant sons. The Fremantle Lumpers’ Union held a “smoke social”, during which “[t]he patriotic spirit reigned supreme, and

\(^{18}\) Midland District Council minutes, 4 January 1915.
\(^{19}\) \(WW\), 19 February 1915, p2.
loud cheers were given for the departing members. In Kalgoorlie the patriotic spirit was not restrained to merely singing patriotic songs, with massive crowds flooding the streets:

It is a strange world, and Kalgoorlie presented a strange sight on Monday last, when the overseas contingent of volunteers marched to the railway station en route for Perth, headed by the brass band and the pipers, with the Union Jack flying over all. All the way from the drill-hall in Cheltham-street the contingent was followed by a shouting, cheering crowd of all sorts and sizes and of all grades of social standing. ... The scene at the station was impressive from the wild enthusiasm of the spectators. For safety’s sake the station doors were closed in order to keep the platforms from being overcrowded, but the crowd could not be checked, the doors flew open under the pressure, hundreds climbed the fences, others dropped from the overhead bridge, and the platforms were soon packed to suffocation. ... The scene, like the occasion of it, was unique, and will not soon be forgotten by those who witnessed the departure of the first goldfields contingent to take part in a European war.

A similar scene occurred the following month, and even “the most phlegmatic must have experienced a thrill and shared in a greater or less degree the enthusiasm of the crowd that lined the footpaths, balconies, and windows en route.” The public demanded vocal support for the troops and the war effort, to such an extent that even the Worker’s sports reporter felt it necessary to give an account of “Our Athletes in War”, noting that the many sportsmen who had enlisted “will command respect from the enemy, and will fight as valiantly with the lethal weapon as they have foe on the grassy sward or in the ‘magic square.” The war affected every aspect of Western Australian life, and it is unsurprising that the population would support the effort given the departure to the front of vast numbers of its sons. Those who opposed the war were fighting an uphill battle.

20 WW, 18 September 1914, p4.
21 WW, 21 August 1914, p4.
22 WW, 11 September 1914, p4.
23 WW, 28 August 1914, p6.
Peace and pro-Germanism

The labour movement’s limited patience for the peace movement’s views is revealed in their treatment of Joe Swebules, the Secretary of the Clerks’ Union, after he questioned the veracity and bias of claims of atrocities being committed by German soldiers. The *Westralian Worker*, though, was far more accommodating. Swebules was well known in the labour movement, speaking regularly on the Perth Esplanade and elsewhere, and frequently attracting large crowds.24 His involvement with the Socialist Party no doubt frequently put him at odds with the moderates in the ALF, and it is not difficult to imagine why a delegate to the Metropolitan Council would say he could “always be depended upon to oppose anything and everything, and [that he] is often a source of annoyance to the chairman with his continual interjections.”25 It was his willingness to speak up when his views were unwelcome that landed him in trouble.

In March 1915, Swebules was criticised by the *Sunday Times* for comments he had made while speaking from the Socialist Platform on the Esplanade. It called him “a liar or merely a fool”, it wrote, criticising “pro-Germans with foreign-sounding names and Trades Hall red-raggers whose fat heads are full of flatulence and Karl Marx.” This diatribe obviously struck a chord with the Western Australian public, including many

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24 For example, he debated the justification of the IWW with Mick Sawtell on 13 September. *(WW*, 11 September 1914, p.5.) He also represented the Workers’ Educational Association in a debate against the University Debating Society, arguing against the proposition “that the ultimate gain of war is greater than the ultimate loss.” The WEA “won in a decisive manner, the decision of the referee being greeted with cheers from the large audience.” *(WW*, 25 June 1915, p.2.) Monty O’Dowd wrote that “Wherever Swebules has had the opportunity of making his views clear, viz., on the Socialist Platform on the Esplanade, he has thoroughly satisfied his audience, which, on several occasions, numbered over a thousand.” *(WW*, 21 May 1915, p.3.)

within the labour movement. Swebleses defended himself by insisting he was “neither pro-British nor pro-Boer, but a cosmopolitan.” It was not enough.26

Mr Gilmour wanted Swebleses expelled from the Metropolitan Council, and a special meeting of the Council was convened on 6 May to deal with it. When the appointed time arrived, Gilmour had apparently had a change of heart; he moved “[t]hat Mr. Swebleses is not a fit and proper person to fill the position of trustee.” This formulation was a compromise to satisfy those delegates who were concerned about banishing a member simply for speaking out of turn. Armed with the Sunday Times article, Gilmour claimed Swebleses “held a brief for the dispensers of culture and nauseating gases.” Some delegates were not content to trust the word of the Times, as it was seen as “one of the bitterest opponents of the Labor movement.” Nonetheless, on a vote of 34 to 29, Joe Swebleses was removed from his position as a trustee of the Metropolitan Council of the Australian Labor Federation.27

The reaction from Swebleses’ supporters was immediate. Even before the Westralian Worker had reported the meeting’s proceedings, they had begun their letter-writing campaign in support of free speech. “Humanitas” of Leederville wrote that the punishment “proves to demonstration the utter inability of his opponents to meet, let alone silence, him in fair and open debate.” Monty O’Dowd was outraged: “A gutter journal writes down a man it knows nothing about, incidentally telling the Labor people that they ought to kick the said man out. The Labor people hear, and so great is their

27 WW, 16 April 1915, p2; 14 May 1915, p2. On 17 June a special meeting was convened to consider Swebleses’ reinstatement. Despite a larger attendance, delegates were for and against Swebleses in roughly the same proportions as the last time. Accordingly, the rescinding motion was lost by 45 to 38. (WW, 25 July 1915, p2.)
respect for the said gutter journal, that they fall over each other to do the kicking.”

H.M. Leighton, who would play a central role in the anti-conscription campaign later in the war, offered a well written and considered opinion:

Is it necessary for the safety of the Empire that we should all be compelled, at the point of the bayonet, to subscribe to the opinion that the English are a lot of stained-glass angels, and the Germans a horde of blood-thirsty savages? If not, then it would be interesting to know what the super-patriots on the Council had in view. […]

I would remind those who voted for the resolution that if they really feel so sensitive about the honor of the British flag, they should avoid sullying it by trying to suppress free speech, especially when, as in the case of Mr. Swebleses, it is used to counteract the campaign of hate that is being so assiduously cultivated in some quarters.

He did not believe that Swebleses’ punishment was “a true expression of the opinion of the Labor movement in Western Australia”.

The incident had sparked a fresh debate about the war on the pages of the Westralian Worker, due mainly to its leader in the aftermath of the Metropolitan Council’s original motion. “This paper,” it insisted, “regrets the vote of censure passed by the Metropolitan Council upon Mr. Swebleses. … Some of his remarks may have been indiscreet, but it is better far for a few indiscreet remarks to be made in the open than for free speech to be stifled.”

In that spirit of open debate, it devoted the rest of the article to attacking Swebleses:

There are many people, of course, who fervently support their country through right or wrong, through thick or thin. National patriotism of this description has existed since groups of men first began to form themselves into nations, but it is a very different thing to the wider and more exalted patriotism which stands for Right. It is feasible for any person to exclaim with Mr. Swebleses: “I am neither pro-German nor pro-British,” but it is not possible for the same man to

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28 _WW_, 14 May 1915, p2; 21 May 1915, p3.
29 _WW_, 14 May 1915, p2.
say: "I am neither pro-Right, nor pro-Wrong." And thus it is that, though the national question obtrudes itself in the present struggle, it is overshadowed by the question as to the innocence or guilt of those who are engaged in this terrible war.\(^{31}\)

It continued to explain that Germany was entirely guilty, "and a thousand specious arguments cannot disguise or hide the hideous truth." Germany declared war, invaded Belgium, and intended to annex her. Of course some allegations of atrocities committed by the Germans are false, but "why dwell on these false charges, when it is denied by no-one that fearful atrocities have been committed in Belgium in connection with the destruction of towns and the shooting of hundreds of innocent civilians?" On the other hand, Britain was entirely innocent, sticking up for Belgium as a bystander would defend a child against a bully. By substituting moralistic analogies for hard-headed analysis, the *Worker* was placing itself firmly within the populist body of opinion—and inviting a fierce response from the peace movement.\(^{32}\)

Joe Sweblesses, as "an interested person," requested the right of reply, and used it to great effect: "Like yourself, my position is pro-Right, anti-Wrong; not pro-British or pro-German. But here we part company."

To you the matter is simple. Here was Belgium, a child power, being bullied by the big and brutal Germany. England was bound to step in, nay, pledged to interfere to stop the bully from trampling the little child underfoot and annexing the territory. To me, however, having read the White Papers and other diplomatic material, the morality or immorality of the whole proceeding

\(^{31}\) *WW*, 14 May 1915, p4.

\(^{32}\) *WW*, 14 May 1915, p4. H.M. Leighton later proposed an analogy of his own: "In the comment to my letter in last week’s ‘Worker,’ I am asked whether I ‘hold to the opinion that a policeman who sees a child assaulted by a strong man is justified in a policy of non-interference because he is afraid.’ I may say at once that I do not hold to that opinion, but I have my own opinion of the policeman who knows the child is in danger of assault and yet commits himself to a course of action which requires the child to be interposed between the bully and himself and urged to fight." (*WW*, 27 August 1915, p3.)
is far more complex. ... We have simply twisted our virtuous international morality to suit the circumstances.33

Several of Sweales’s Socialist comrades joined him in responding to the editorial. Lilian Foxcroft reiterated the complaint she had made at the beginning of the war: “Eight months ago I accused the ‘Worker’ of taking up a cowardly and vacillating attitude on the war. The policy of the paper since then has given me no reason to withdraw that charge.” Another regular letter-writer, H.M. Leighton, protested that “when our Labor paper hoists the black flag of capitalism it is time to sit up and take notice”, and questioned its assumption “that because Germany is wrong, the Allies are necessarily right. But there is another alternative—they may all be wrong, and in view of the fallibility of human nature, one is safe in saying the latter view is the correct one.”34

More than anything, they were angry that the Worker had abandoned any real attempt to come to grips with the causes of war in favour of vague platitudes and simplistic caricatures. The Germany-as-bully analogy might have been acceptable as a political cartoon (indeed, the paper had published just such an image some months earlier), but it would not satisfy the well- and widely-read Socialists.35 Their letters referred to British defence white papers, the London Times, the Beaconsfield Standard, the Pall Mall Gazette, the Spectator, the Labor Leader and the Australian Worker. By contrast the Westralian Worker relied on patriotic fervour and impassioned pleas to condemn German aggression.

33 WW, 21 May 1914, p3.
34 WW, 21 May 1915, p3. The same criticism was made by “Acid” a week later: “In connection with your recent leader may I point out that your logic leads you astray. You say that a man must be either pro-right or pro-wrong. You seem to argue that as Germany is wrong—which is admitted—then England, being on the opposite side of Germany must be right, whereas there is a possibility that they may both be wrong.” (WW, 28 May 1915, p5.)
35 See Figure 2 on page 34.
Figure 2. Peace activists attempted to raise the standard of debate, and were angry that the Westralian Worker relied on simplistic caricatures. Here, the British Navy saves an innocent child from a bullying German pirate. (WW, 7 August 1914, p12.)

One of the few occasions on which the Worker engaged in a genuine debate with a contributor was when T.H. Baird offered an explanation for Germany's actions. "Now, a general mobilisation is, at times of crisis, ...regarded in very much the same light as a declaration of war," he argued. "That Germany would regard it as such Europe knew... And yet Russia, with eyes wide open, ordered a general mobilisation knowing that it meant war."36 The editor countered:

With regard to Russia's mobilisation order, it has to be remembered that the gathering of troops together in that country was a very difficult matter, owing to the vast distances to be covered and the paucity of railways. ... Germany declared war against Russia for mobilising, and then flung nearly all her troops AGAINST FRANCE AND BELGIUM, leaving the eastern Prussian frontier

36 WW, 28 May 1915, p5.
weakly guarded. This shows that Germany did not fear Russian mobilisation, and that it was only seized upon by the military caste as a pretext to start the war for European domination.  

While this is a cogent response, the *Worker*’s exasperation is demonstrated by the brief outburst of capital letters. It would have preferred that these pesky peaceniks simply fell into line with the rest of the labour movement, and usually it did not bother to debate them. Instead, the paper responded by repeating ever more forcefully that “GERMANY AND AUSTRIA WERE THE AGGRESSORS, AND WITHIN 24 HOURS OF THE DECLARATION OF WAR THE DEVASTATION OF POLAND HAD BEGUN.”

The most persistent of Swebileses’ supporters was H.M. Leighton, an IWW member. Over a period of many months, he regularly penned letters in support of the earliest possible conclusion of the war. His arguments initially drew brief responses from *Worker*, but from October 1915 onwards an anonymous writer going by the *nom-de-plume* “Unionist” engaged Leighton in a regular debate. They exchanged letters on a weekly basis; although there was a brief hiatus over Christmas when Unionist “delayed answering his letters owing to regard for your space.” Leighton’s ongoing enthusiasm was intimately connected with the formation of a branch of the Australian Peace Alliance in Perth. The *Westralian Worker* reported that Lilian Foxcroft, H.M. Leighton, Helen Creeth and Don Cameron planned to convene a meeting for that purpose, and published the objects and platform of the organisation. Leighton’s persistent letter-writing campaign demonstrated a keen understanding of the power of the press to disseminate

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37 *WW*, 28 May 1915, p.5.
38 *WW*, 21 May 1915, p.3.
39 *WW*, 7 January 1916, p.5.
40 *WW*, 13 August 1915, p.3; 22 October 1915, p.6.
ideas. This media savvy would be demonstrated again as those involved in the Peace Alliance threw their weight behind the anti-conscription campaign.

The paper’s willingness to print so many letters opposed to both the Metropolitan Council’s decision to punish Joe Swebleses and its own editorial position, demonstrates that its pronouncement in favour of free speech was genuine. There was no doubt what the Westralian Worker thought of the war (it certainly did not agree with Swebleses, Foxcroft, Leighton and their friends), but it nonetheless provided ample space for opposing views to be expressed to the rest of the labour movement. The Worker’s humour columnist, “Scribo,” described how he would have dealt with dissenters if appointed to the position of editor for a day:

Taking advantage of the lull I began an illuminating article on “Trades Unionism in the Stone Age.” Soon, however, a wild-looking person with a flaming red tie strolled into the landscape and accosted me.

“Will you let me look at your file?” he asked. “I hear there’s something in the paper about me; but of course, I never buy your rotten rag.”

“Why not?” I asked innocently.

“Why not?” he roared. “You are a black-hearted, plutocratic capitalistic organ, masquerading as a friend of the workers. You’re as meek as Moses and as mild as a sucking dove [sic]. Why don’t you ladle it out to ‘em hot instead of sitting on the fence talking pap.” He went on for some time in this way, but I got him out at last by promising to write an article for the next issue advocating the assassination of all the crowned heads in the world. He’ll be pretty wild when that article does not appear, but my troubles; I won’t be here when he calls.41

In reality, the Worker’s policy was far more accepting. Like Scribo, it refused to change its opinions when challenged by the peace activists, but at the same time it was not averse to printing their contributions. By taking an editorial position that reflected the official opinion of the labour movement (and that of the great majority of the rank-and-file),

41 WW, 28 May 1915, p2.
while maintaining a policy of openness to the opinions of a small but sincere and active minority, the *Worker* did a great service to WA labour. It managed to straddle a deep, if uneven, division within the movement, and in this regard, the *Westralian Worker* was indeed "sitting on the rail".
Chapter three

Our old pals the square’eads

Although Western Australia at the beginning of the twentieth century was a reasonably ethnically homogenous society, populated mainly by British and Irish migrants and their descendents, there was a large and growing group of Germans in the State. Mary Mennicken demonstrates that “at the beginning of the century the German-speaking community formed the largest group of [non-English speaking] Europeans in the State.” This community was made up primarily of German nationals, but also of immigrants from other German-speaking nations like Austria and Switzerland. “By 1914 the German-speaking community was in its heyday with a flourishing German club in Fremantle and German-speaking Lutheran communities in Perth, Fremantle, the Goldfields and in the south of the State.”

Hostility towards Germans in wartime is well documented. The public was fearful, suspicious and hateful. “The feeling was that ‘the only good German was a dead German’”, and it captured Western Australia quickly. Bobbie Oliver refers to an incident that took place almost immediately after the war broke out, on 5 August 1914, in which a gang of youths hurled bricks at the Austrian Consulate on St George’s Terrace until the caretaker removed a coat of arms from the wall. A military detention camp was quickly established at Rottnest Island, a holiday resort, for the internment of all “enemy aliens” who were perceived to be a potential threat; evidently the perception of an imminent threat was widespread, as “[i]t is only in Western Australia that a general round-up of

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2 Mennicken, M. The Germans in Western Australia, p58.
aliens occurred.” Indeed, at the national concentration camp at Liverpool, New South Wales, twenty-one per cent of inmates originated in Western Australia.

A great many enemy aliens interned were forced to turn themselves in by destitution. The wives of detainees were paid a stipend of 10s per week, with an additional 2s 6d per child; in 1916 these amounts were increased to 15s and 3s respectively. This was an attractive option when faced with the alternative: unemployment. Many workers refused to work alongside Germans or other “enemy aliens”. The Fremantle Lumpers’ Union, for example, refused membership (and thereby work) to many immigrants.

The Secretary of the Amalgamated Baking Trades Industrial Union expressed concern in 1915 that the German bakers H. Geise, Albert Loosen, Charlie Triaden, John Lohff, and Joe Neissener were union members and he wanted to know “the truth about them” as “certain utterances had been overheard by other union members”. Neissener and many others were put out of work as “no Britisher would work where a German was employed”. In February 1916, Neissener signed a declaration stating that he was destitute and wanted to be interned on a voluntary basis to be able to keep alive.

On the other hand, there is evidence to suggest that the labour movement resisted the urge to persecute Germans. In the early establishment of guidelines for internment, Oliver “senses an attempt by the Western Australian [Labor] Government to protect the aliens themselves”. The editor of the Westralian Worker, John Hilton, defended in court the loyalty of the Dutch-born Willem Siebenhaar, whose foreign-sounding name and radical politics had resulted in his suspension from the public service. There was a tension between the labour movement’s “head”, which stood for international solidarity and

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4 Oliver, B. War and Peace in Western Australia, p64; Mennicken, M. The Germans in Western Australia, pp64-66.
5 Oliver, B. War and Peace in Western Australia, p76.
6 Mennicken, M. The Germans in Western Australia, p60.
7 Oliver, B. War and Peace in Western Australia, p66.
8 Segal, N. Who and What Was Siebenhaar, p6.
“British fair play”, and its “heart”, which was angry at Germany for starting the war and could not bear to work alongside the enemy’s sons.

The *Westralian Worker*’s immediate response to the war, as we have seen, was to stress that “[w]ith the vast bulk of the German and Austrian people we have no quarrel whatever”, and that “[o]ur nation is at war. This doesn’t follow that we have to hate anybody.” It was not much concerned by the internment of Germans at Rottnest, trusting the Labor governments to take such actions as were necessary to protect Western Australia’s interests. The subject was one of minor amusement. On 14 August 1914, it reported that “[s]everal Germans … are having a spell at the popular tourist resort of Rottnest”, and recounted this amusing incident: “On hearing that several Germans had been arrested at Bunbury an unsophisticated Barrack-street tailor was heard to exclaim, ‘Thank God, Bunbury has declared her neutrality!’” Apart from this couple of sentences, the problem of dealing with enemy aliens was not addressed in the immediate wake of the war’s outbreak.⁹

It was not until late October that the subject was mentioned in any depth, and even then there seemed to be little sense of urgency. “Imperialist” wrote calling for the internment of “all those who naturalised in less than three months of the outbreak of the war, and of course those who are not naturalised at all”, and argued that “all German Clubs should be forthwith closed”. Shortly afterwards, T.H. Baird reminded the *Worker*’s readers of Germany’s socialist credentials, and insisted that while “[t]he idea that the German people are all bad is very prevalent just now, … anything that tends to allay the bitter

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feeling ... towards the Germans as a people will be for the good of the world’s Labor movement.” Baird seems to have been responding to an atmosphere that was not conveyed by the pages of the Worker, which suggests that its policy was to avoid hysterical anti-Germanism and maintain a cool head about whether Germans who had lived in Australia for many years could suddenly become dangerous enemies. For example, in January 1915 the military searched the homes of prominent German businessmen, the Streliz brothers; the paper responded by emphasising that “nothing of a compromising nature was found” and that “[b]oth are naturalised subjects with Australian wives and children, and their eighty employees are all British.” This was an opportunity to generate hysteria about the possible disloyalty of influential German-Australians, but the Worker preferred to douse the flames of suspicion.  

A report by “Gossip” about his visit to the temporary military camp on the Fremantle Esplanade certainly supports this conjecture, and is remarkable for its sympathy towards the “German sea captains” interned there:

One could not help but feel sorry for these large, comfortable, respectable citizens, who, with long curved pipes drooping from their hairy mouths, mooched aimlessly up and down watching in silence with unexpressive faces the various squads at work. They did look so deadly bored! They had plenty of liberty, but—there was always the lad with the fixed bayonet and ten rounds of ball cartridges.

Better to be at the front and to risk being shot, than to be “interned” for day after day, week after week, month after month—and nothing, absolutely nothing to do!

Later, he recognised one of the prisoners:

There was an interesting episode during the afternoon when the police brought in another prisoner, one Richter, suspected of being an unnaturalised German.

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10 *WW*, 23 October 1914, p6; 6 November 1914, p3; 8 January 1915, p4.
... Then I remembered Richter used to be a Kalgoorlie barber, and tried very hard to enlist in the Goldfields Regiment which is now taking charge of his person! Captain (now Major) Kingdon wouldn’t have him in his company because he could speak English but brokenly. But Richter protested, and took a lot of shaking off.11

Gossip’s empathy for the internees was not universally felt. Several unions had begun to receive complaints from their members about working alongside Germans and other migrants they suspected of disloyalty. The mining unions had always been opposed to foreign labour, citing the fatal risks posed by communication problems on the mines. In the wartime climate, they began to agitate against aliens once again, particularly in the face of widespread unemployment. These complaints reached the ALF’s Metropolitan Council through G. Kerr, who suggested that a committee be formed to investigate the problem. As “the question was cropping up in various quarters” and “feeling was very much divided on the subject”, Kerr’s proposal was adopted so that “[a]n authoritative statement [might] go out from the heads of the movement.”12

The committee reported a fortnight later, concluding that “we should not discriminate in working with those who were our former mates, and who are related to countries who have been made our enemies.” It stressed that “it was highly improbable that Austrian and German workers who had gradually built up homes in these parts would use their influence to assist the enemy in any way”, and referred to the strong unionist principles held by German immigrants. The report was well received. One wag suggested that the mother of the British monarch should be British (she was German). E.J. Tweedall

11 WW, 13 November 1914, p3. This sympathetic description of the Kalgoorlie barber contrasts sharply with the Worker’s goldfields column, which is explored in greater depth later. Anthony Splivalo, one of those interned on Rottnest, mentions in his memoir that, “The only members of this nationality I had ever known were the two German barbers in Kalgoorlie.” (The Home Fires. Fremantle Arts Centre Press: Fremantle, 1982, p64.) It is quite possible that Richter is one of the men he remembered.
12 WW, 9 October 1914, p5; 6 November 1914, p4; 27 November 1914, p3.
dissented, insisting that "if he lived in Germany and attained the age of a hundred not all the German whitewashing would make him anything else than an Irishman" and that "whether naturalised or unnaturalised they should be banished to Rottnest." In the end, though, the report was endorsed by the meeting "almost unanimously." The arguments advanced by the report clearly informed J.A. Doland and Alexander McCallum's first annual report to the State Executive during wartime:

We have no quarrel with the German worker. We have just as much in common with him as we have with our comrades in France, Belgium and Russia, and we trust that it will not be long before we are again extending to him along with the workers of all countries the hand of fraternal greetings. It may be as well if, at this critical period, we issued a warning to the organisations not to allow racial hatred to spring up in our ranks. The Labor movement is too great a movement to allow the question of accident of birthplace to interfere with our comradeship... A broadminded toleration should be exercised, and so long as a worker is a loyal citizen and a unionist no exception should be taken to him.\(^{14}\)

This was more than just a statement of the ALF’s policy regarding "preference to Britishers"; it was a plea to member organisations to halt the trend towards persecution that had already begun. In some industries the feeling against foreigners was stronger than in others. Three columns in particular—"Goldfields Glimpses: Life & Labor on the Golden Mile", "Timber Topics" and "Fremantle Doings"—offer different perspectives on an issue that was of immense importance to the labour movement, and allow us to analyse the relationship of the *Westralian Worker* to different sections of contemporary society.

\(^{13}\) *WW*, 11 December 1914, p.6.
\(^{14}\) *WW*, 19 February 1915, p.2.
On the goldfields

The most fervent anti-enemy sentiment was expressed by H.E.J. Foreman, the manager of the *Worker*’s Kalgoorlie office. He wrote under the penname “Maori”, and from the start of the war took a virulent pro-British line.\(^{15}\) His passionate and colourful descriptions of the departure of Kalgoorlie volunteers have been referred to previously,\(^ {16}\) and even before the war had started the column had praised “the fine stalwart men and slim active youths” who had been inducted into the military reserves: “we cannot help feeling a thrill of pride when we see our fine citizen soldiers on parade, knowing as we do that they are being trained to defend their own country against foreign aggression”.\(^ {17}\) The goldfields had a strong sense of nationalism and commitment to Empire, and Foreman was no exception.

The dangers posed to mine workers by the poor English of some migrants had long been a concern, and the onset of war heightened the tensions felt in the workforce. The irrational fearfulness of the goldfields’ population is illustrated by their reaction to an unexplained earthquake. While Foreman stressed that “[u]p to the present all ideas as to the cause are purely theoretical”, he also mentioned that “I have met some who are inclined to believe it is some devilish scheme of the Kaiser’s which has gone ‘agley’ like most of his cleverly laid plans.” When a bill introduced by the Scaddan government to restrict the use of migrant labour in the mines was defeated in the Legislative Council, there was outrage. In “the present time of crisis, Australia can call upon its manhood to

\(^{15}\) “Maori” was never expressly identified as Foreman, but material published about conscription during the first plebiscite campaign was signed by Foreman. Although it is possible that the manager of the *Worker*’s goldfields office was protecting a correspondent’s identity, it is extremely unlikely that the Kalgoorlie office would have left the “Goldfields Glimpses” column for an outsider to write.

\(^{16}\) See page 28.

\(^{17}\) *WW*, 31 July 1914, p5.
defend the country,“ ran the argument, “but IT CANNOT CALL upon unnaturalised non-English speaking foreigners to whom some of the mine managers love to give preference over Britishers. ... [T]he great Liberal leader, Frank Wilson, ... should pay a visit to some of his friends at Rottnest!”18

This emotional plea to wartime patriotism is typical of the rhetoric used in the debate over “preference to Britishers”, but the underlying cause of the tension was unemployment. Foreman would regularly make the link between unemployed Britishers and migrant workers, and to him the problem’s solution was obvious: the military authorities should arrest all non-Britishers and make their jobs available to more suitable candidates.

There are at the present time some 300 or 400 Britishers walking around the fields seeking work and wanting it badly. At the same time I am led to understand by those in a position to know there are about the same number of foreigners at work on the mines on the belt. This is hardly a state of affairs that should be tolerated in a loyal British community. It will no doubt be argued that many of these foreigners although subjects of the nations we are at present being attacked by are themselves opposed to the Governments they are under, and are in no way favourable to the present war. That is as it may be. The fact remains, however, they are liable to service in that country to which they owe allegiance, they have not adopted this as their country, they are earning and saving money with which they will go home when opportunity offers and portion of that money will, either directly of [sic] indirectly, be used as a weapon against Britain. ... [A]ction should be taken by the Defence authorities here and the out-of-work Britisher given a chance to get work.19

The employers’ response, throughout the war, was that foreigners would work in conditions that Britishers refused to endure. This allowed the labour movement to cloak their xenophobia in the garb of legitimate industrial concerns. “If such a statement is correct,” wrote Foreman, “then there can only be three reasons why a Britisher should refuse to work where an alien does not object to. Either the work is more arduous than a

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18 *WW*, 9 October 1914, p5; 30 October 1914, p4.
19 *WW*, 6 November 1914, p4.
white man should be asked to do, it is unsafe, or it is unhealthy. Neither of these conditions should exist in any mine on the belt.”²⁰ This call for improved working conditions sounds like a worthy aim, but it was merely a debating point in response to claims made by the Chamber of Mines. The labour movement did not want to raise the standards migrant workers endured, it wanted to put them out of work altogether. The view was reportedly widespread: “Just at the present juncture, at any rate, almost everyone in the community believes in Britishers getting the preference, all things being equal, when there is a job going, and it is a mighty just belief too.”²¹

The xenophobic attitude grew more pervasive as time went on. In late 1914, a deputation comprised of civic and union leaders waited on the Chamber of Mines and “preferred [sic] their request to the Chamber, that whenever opportunity offered for work on the mines preference should be given to Britishers.” The request was accepted, and as the employers’ scrambled to look more patriotic than their neighbours, “[s]ome of the mine managers went so far as to offer to replace any absolute foreigners who might be employed with British labor, but the deputation made it plain that they were not seeking the discharge of any men and only required an assurance that in future a patriotic preference should be shown.”²² In January 1915, the damage caused by their anti-enemy campaign worried the Eastern Goldfields ALF. The Secretary wrote to the Defence Department “drawing attention to the unfortunate position of many naturalised Germans and Austrians, who had been thrown out of employment owing to natural prejudice, and asking whether the Department had any intention of providing for them.” It did not, and

²⁰ WW, 6 November 1914, p4.
²¹ WW, 20 November 1914, p4.
²² WW, 27 November 1914, p7.
“the Minister desired to point out that there were quite a number of British born people in Australia who were at present unable to find employment either.” This tough stance was endorsed by Foreman: “Hear, hear! Senator Pearce. I am with you there all the way!”

Subtlety was not Foreman’s forte, and he consistently used his column to agitate against the exercise of caution. To him, the risk of injustice to an innocent migrant was insignificant: all foreigners were enemies who should be incarcerated or left to starve without employment. By July 1915, his rhetoric grew more forceful:

A very large number of Austrians and aliens are still at large on the northern woodlines, and I am credibly informed that there are over 70 foreigners at work on the Gwalia mine alone, probably a larger number than ever before. Of course, there are quite a number who have discovered that they are Slavs, Croatians, Dalmatians or something else which will serve their turn for the present. The unpleasant fact remains, however, that in times past when any trouble threatened with the Britishers on the job they were all “Austria man” and stood together like one family. ... I trust the time is not far distant when every decent-minded man and woman in the community will look with scorn and contempt on the disloyal rotter who employs a foreigner while there is a Britisher to be found looking for a job.

At times, Foreman’s genuine concern for his unemployed compatriots was revealed. In response to a Sunday Times accusation of idleness in the working-class (what would today be termed “dole bludging”), Foreman gave a moving description of the state of affairs:

At every change of shift there are scores of men on every mine following up the chance of getting even one shift in. Only yesterday there were between 80 and 70 men on the Horseshoe looking for work, 20 to 30 on the Ivanhoe, and pretty well the same average on all the other mines. These men are not looking for “fancy jobs” either, but glad and thankful to get a shift in at anything that will give them a few shillings to help keep the wolf from the door. Talk about men not being genuine unemployed. Let the writer of the paragraph in question try getting out of his comfortable bed at 12 o’clock at night in the freezing cold and trot round some of the mines and see the men who have done the same on the off chance of getting on for a shift, waiting about in the damp and cold.

24 WW, 30 July 1915, p5.
Men don’t do that for fun or seeking a change of occupation. ... [There are] scores of men who are not wasters and vagabonds, but genuine hardworking men, badly in need of employment.  

In Perth, there was a similar concern about the extent of unemployment caused by the war. Official figures showed that for the quarter ending 30 September 1914, Western Australia’s unemployment rate was 9.2 per cent. By March 1915, the situation had deteriorated significantly. Figures provided by affiliated unions to the Metropolitan Council of the ALF showed that 39.9 per cent of unionists were unemployed, with a further 41% working reduced hours. In some industries, the problem was acute: of the Carpenters’ Union’s 1000 members, 750 were without work.  

Don Cameron regularly addressed mass meetings of the unemployed, and his harangues included calls for armed revolt should the government fail to act. The workers “are face to face with their masters, who are in effect denying them the right to live and work”, he insisted “Yes, if intelligent reasoning will not remove the embargo which prevents the hungry from being fed and the idle from working, I favor physical force.”  

Despite the severity of the situation, Cameron did not use migrant workers as a scapegoat. Rather, mass unemployment was a result of capitalism and imperialism, and the solidarity of labour across national boundaries was the solution.  

The patriotic Goldfields, however, could not accept this argument.

By 1916, goldfields workers were determined to take a stand against enemy aliens. The Miners’ Union (the third-largest union in the state, with 2328 members) decided that

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26 *WW*, 5 February 1915, p3; 5 March 1915, p2.
27 *WW*, 3 September 1915, p3. He had previously declared his support for “physical force if all moral suasion failed” at a meeting of the ALF’s Metropolitan Council. (*WW*, 20 August 1915, p3.)
28 The position adopted by Cameron and the Fremantle ALF will be explored in greater depth later.
“after the 1st of February next they will absolutely refuse to work with enemy subjects”. 29

James Cunningham, the union’s secretary, told the Kalgoorlie Miner,

Numbers of these men make no secret of their national sympathies when underground, and expressions of disloyalty have frequently been made during crib time, when the newspapers are generally read... [The] disloyal sentiments expressed were reported by members to have been almost unbearable, most particularly for those who have relatives fighting at the front. 30

H.E.J. Foreman’s words in the Westralian Worker a day previously are striking in their similarity:

All Britishers at the present time very naturally resent having to work with enemy subjects. The position, however, is intensified in the case where perhaps a number of Britishers are on the plat[form] having crib, and in the same place may be four or five Austrians or other enemy subjects. With the crib the papers are brought out by the aliens, who read to each other the reports of supposed allied defeats, etc., and it needs no knowledge of their language to realise that they are gloating and rejoicing over these incidents. The Britishers have relatives and friends at the front, and it needs only a small spark to ignite the tinder which may at any time blaze up into an uncontrollable fire. 31

By adopting the union’s line, the Worker became a participant in the industrial dispute rather than a mere interested bystander. The Miners’ Union condemned the Defence Department for failing to intern foreigners; the ALF gave the Minister one last chance to toughen the internment policy, insisting that “all enemy subjects, irrespective of position, be interned, the impression that this was not being done, being detrimental to recruiting”; and Foreman issued a direct threat: “Does [the Minister for Defence] wish to bring about another industrial crisis? We should hope not. But it is certainly time he took action.” 32

On Sunday, 6 February the Miners’ Union met at Boulder to hear the Department’s response. Captain Corbett, an intelligence officer who had been sent to the fields in

30 Kalgoorlie Miner, 29 January 1916.
response to a previous request by the union, reported that the Government would not adopt a policy of mass internment “because all the enemy subjects on the field were known to his Department and were not considered a risk to security.” Foreman glossed over this explanation, reporting only that Corbett “gave an explanation of the Department’s attitude, also answering a number of questions. He did not, however, succeed in satisfying the meeting that all that could be done was being attempted”.

Accordingly, the Miners’ Union appointed vigilance committees who would inspect the naturalisation papers of any working foreigner challenged by his British workmates. If the documents could not be produced, the workers would strike until the foreigner was laid off.33

The results of the strike demonstrate that it was pursued out of irrational xenophobia rather than realistic analysis of the situation. Very few of the immigrants risked coming to work, and it was noted that “the 120 Slavs who profess themselves to be in favor of the Allies nearly all decided to keep away from the mines rather than cause any trouble.”34 Now, however, he expressed sympathy for “[t]hese people [who] have much against their wills been ground under the heel of Austria, and have at no time had any love for their masters.”

It is rather hard, because since the war a certain section of them have subscribed hundreds of pounds for the relief of the Belgians, Serbians and others who are fighting the Austro-German curse, and have done everything in their power to show that they have no sympathy with the authority which holds their country in thrall in Europe.35

34 WW, 11 February 1916, p5.
But despite this admission that over a hundred innocent men had been made destitute, Foreman dismissed any obligation the Miners’ Union might have for them. “It appears to be hard luck,” he wrote, “but it is not the only unfortunate position brought about by this unholy struggle.”36 Six months earlier, Foreman had claimed they were not really Slavs, but were “Austria man” [sic]; his concern for their plight did not last long before he returned to that refrain.37

The cry is that the loyal Slavs, should have been allowed to work. But the line of demarcation was too difficult to draw. Before the war they were all proud to all themselves “Austria men,” and only in isolated cases did we hear of Slav nationality. It is unfortunate that there are fifty wives and ninety-four children concerned in the trouble. But whatever measures may be taken for the relief of those in actual distress, the Miners seem determined that the resolution passed shall stand... [T]here is no moral obligation involved. From all accounts the enemy subjects who have in the past been interned showed absolutely no gratitude for the humane treatment they received at the hands of the department.38

Neither the Kalgoorlie and Boulder Miners’ Union, which had precipitated the situation, nor the Defence Department was prepared to offer relief payments to the men; it was ultimately left up to the State Government to provide an allowance to their families, as long as they surrendered themselves to internment. Unmarried men received nothing.39

The true motive of the strike was not to protect those miners who were upset by working alongside the enemy, it was to effect what these days might be called an “ethnic cleansing” of the goldfields. Foreman revealed this on 18 February: “One thing we have all to guard against in the future, and that is that, war or no war, the foreigners must be

36 WW, 11 February 1916, p8.
37 WW, 30 July 1915, p5.
38 WW, 31 March 1916, p8.
kept out. The Miners’ Union has the remedy in its own hands... I hope they will have the same courage to use it, and I believe they will.”

Paradoxically, the strike undermined the xenophobic myth that foreign labourers on the goldfields were stealing work from Britishers. From the turn of the century, mine managers fostered racial division in the workforce. A future president of the United States, Herbert Hoover, pioneered this practice at Gwalia, where he imported Italian labour and sowed disharmony between them and their British workmates. The immigrants were generally used for unskilled and uncomfortable work, hence “[a]lmost the whole of the enemy subjects who have been dismissed from the mines were employed underground as ‘boggers’ or truckers, etc.” Several mines were forced to close down as there was no British labour available to do the work, and up to 200 members of the Surface Workers’ Union were put off. Foreman suggested that the problem would only be temporary, as about 150 Meekatharra men were looking for work. However, they were not genuine unemployed—they were on strike, and the Chamber of Mines refused to hire them on principle. The Worker was put in a difficult position: while it wanted to report that “[g]radually the shortage of labor on the different mines, caused by the withdrawal of the foreign element, is being overcome and soon they will all be in full swing again”, it was forced to advertise that “[t]here is still work for truckers and boggers on the mines of the belt.”

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40 *WW*, 18 February 1916, p8.  
42 *WW*, 11 February 1916, p5.  
The "preference to Britishers" controversy was prolonged because the Chamber of Mines and the unions disagreed over the definition of "enemy alien", and sought clarification from the government. Senator Lynch "put up a most persistent fight" on behalf of the Slavs, but failed to convince the Miners' Union, which reaffirmed its opposition to foreigners on the mines and called for the establishment of a tribunal to hear disputes over nationality. The following week, the union claimed that "three foreigners who were enemy subjects were specially sent for to go on to work". Foreman relished the chance to flex his rhetorical muscles, damning "the wickedly provocative action agreed upon by a body of soulless ghouls, who were willing to sacrifice the interests of their shareholders, the welfare of thousands of Britishers and their wives and families, in fact the life of the whole community for the sake of a score or so foreigners who were born under the Austrian flag."\(^4^4\) Again it was assumed that all foreigners were probably sympathetic to the German military effort:

How many Germans throughout the wide Empire were treated as friends, and acted in every way as decent citizens before the war, but as soon as opportunity offered showed themselves for the liars and hypocrites and enemies they were? ... "Prove this man is against the Allies' cause, and we will sack him," say the Chamber of Mines. What a rotten argument it is. The sneering smile is there, the general demeanor, a gesture is sufficient to brand him for what he is. But how are you going to prove it? No, let the Chamber of Mines individually and collectively prove themselves Britishers.\(^4^5\)

In the end a commission was established to deal with such questions. It commenced its work on 11 September 1916 and was apparently quite successful in resolving disputes, because Foreman's weekly tirades against foreigners all but disappeared from then on.\(^4^6\)

The *Westralian Worker* certainly contributed to the success of the miners' industrial

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\(^4^5\) *WW*, 1 September 1916, p6.

\(^4^6\) *WW*, 15 September 1916, p6. Occasionally anti-German sentiment would find expression in the debate on conscription, but it was of a different nature.
action, by stirring up anti-German sentiment and calling for swift action to be taken.
Foreman’s campaign on behalf of the Miners’ Union reveals the power of the labour press when wielded for a cause.
Chapter four

In the forests

The *Worker*’s coverage of the timber industry did not devote nearly so much attention to racial tension, indicating a large degree of flexibility in terms of the position taken by the paper’s correspondents. The timber workers’ column, “Timber Topics,” was written by the pseudonymous “Vertical”. At the outbreak of war, he noted that “Several timber men, being British reservists, have been summoned to Perth and are now in camp... Several Germans, also from the mills, are having a spell at the popular tourist resort of Rottnest.” However there was no discernible malice in the comment, and there was no mention of Germans or other foreigners for the rest of the year.¹

The threat of mills closing down was of far greater concern. Export demand fell away drastically, and the commandeering of transport ships by the British Admiralty also had an impact. By 1915 the position was “anything but bright for the timber hewers”, as the manager of the State Sawmills announced that it had “fulfilled all orders” and would “at once close down all hewing”. Almost two thousand men were affected, and although the unions worked with management to find alternative employment for married men, the result was that “the paucity of orders is responsible for considerably over 1000 men finding themselves workless.” It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that the now-familiar arguments about foreigners taking Britishers’ jobs would begin to find expression. On 5 February, *Vertical* reported that “[c]onsiderable ill-feeling is shown towards the management of the Kauri Timber Company” because “over 50 per cent. of the employees

¹ *WW*, 14 August 1914, p4.
in the mill are unable to claim British extraction”. Noting the unemployment of Britishers in the area, he asked, “Why is this thus?” However, while Foreman would have launched a weekly crusade against the company until the foreigners were sacked, Vertical was content to leave it at that.\(^2\)

The issue was not raised again until late March, when Vertical reported that the State Sawmills Department had “knocked sideways” the suggestion by “Cornstalk” that unnaturalised foreigners had been employed around the State. He also published a letter purporting to be from an Italian woodcutter, “although it may not be ... convincing”:

[S]ome bloke name the “Cornstalk” be writhin’ somethin’ I calla the dam scillie. He reckon that th’ Stata sora meal wantit the give the Tallian man the preferant, an’ puttin’ off the single man... [H]e say mighta be the Tallian man more better fedin Oostha or fidtin’ for the kundtry. Mighta be you more bedder tho Mishia Cornstalk fidtin for the kundtry.\(^3\)

Despite his willingness to render the letter in what he thought sounded like Italian-English vernacular (a correspondent was unsure whether the “supposed foreigner ... comes from Naples or Tipperary”), Vertical’s clear intention was to hose down racial tension amongst the workers.\(^4\) However, H. McKeown of Worsley wrote to support Cornstalk’s accusation:

As you are aware, on the 1st of January this year the Department issued instructions to stop all single men and foreigners from cutting on Crown lands... Now, about the middle of December 1914, one carter got a special order for his cutters to 9ft. x 10in. x 5in., most of the said cutters being foreigners—a coincidence no doubt.

Also, all foreigners had procured licenses for the month of January before the instructions reached here to stop single men and foreigners. Coincidence again. ... Nor is that all. The original order for 9ft. x 10in. x 5in. was increased, and another carter started to cart the said sleepers beside the one who had got the

\(^2\) *WW*, 8 January 1915, p5; 5 February 1915, p5; 14 August 1914, p4.
\(^3\) *WW*, 26 March 1915, p4.
\(^4\) *WW*, 1 April 1915, p4.
original order. And so coincidence still kept the foreigners cutting on Crown lands.¹

This sounds like a conspiracy theory, and it probably is. The Italians were licensed before the Department’s directive arrived, which says more about the tyranny of distance than it does about “preference to foreigners.” McKeown admitted that when the Department’s representative visited, he “got riled at this coincident fellow, and went after him to punch his head.” However before he could do so, he was told “Oh, there is no reason why you should not; cut there by all means,” and was given two weeks’ work. ⁶ When he continued the debate, he mentioned that “[s]ome of my friends are asking me why I am troubling,” which suggests that racial tension amongst the woodworkers was not particularly pronounced.⁷

McKeown’s anger towards the Department was probably driven by its administrative bungling. His first letter mentioned that “it took the Department so long to send us our money that some of us missed other work for the want of our train fare.” He also mentioned that after the two weeks’ work offered by the State, he worked for a private company, “[a]nd we are now waiting the royal pleasure of the Department for our money. But we got Lewis and Reid’s first, although the Department had 10 days’ start.”⁸ His second letter made it explicit:

And when I find a State Department being made a mess and a muddle of by petty officials under a Labor Government I feel that I would be guilty as an accessory to the crime of injuring the working class movement if I did not make a protest. If the State Departments must suffer from muddle (the expression is mild) for God’s sake let our opponents do the muddling, and let me add that Caesar is getting indifferent if not angry. I will not be surprised if

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¹ WW, 1 April 1915, p4.
² WW, 1 April 1915, p4.
³ WW, 23 April 1915, p5.
⁴ WW, 1 April 1915, p5.
at the next general election Caesar lops off a few ministerial and political heads. It is a moot point whether Caesar will be so very much to blame when he does. Those who sit in the seats of the mighty never think of details or what they are pleased to term small matters. Therein lies their road to a fall and unfortunately others are part in the crush.  

Trouble at the State Karri Mill at Manjimup lends support to McKeown’s criticisms of the Department. Owing to fewer orders, the management was forced to lay off workers. The union would not have been opposed to such an action—the downturn in the industry was undeniable, and they typically focused their attention on trying to find other work for those men with dependants. In this case, though, the Department was criticised for “grevious injustices … wrought amongst the employees.” Workers with long records of service to the State were put off in favour of newcomers, and “several protests will be lodged with the Ministerial head of the department” in order to rectify the situation “where there appears to be no local remedy or redress”. By contrast, management immediately agreed not to keep on unnaturalised foreigners. 

Opposition to “enemy aliens” amongst the timber workers was far less than that found on the goldfields. However, there were occasional reports of dissatisfaction with the situation. One correspondent, “Hewer,” wrote that Greeks and Austrians, as well as some Britishers, were hired to fill a small order at Jarrahdale. His complaint was that the company did not advertise the job to Britishers who were already working for the State. 

In January 1916, Vertical mentioned that he had “conversed with scores of men during the past month who absolutely refuse to enlist unless the foreigners (who don’t even possess a vote in the country) are prepared to play their part”, and urged allied aliens to

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9 WW, 23 April 1915, p5.
11 WW, 23 July 1915, p5.
enlist. Some months previously, he had published a letter from “Sossari Skazzarino,” supposedly an Italian who had returned to join the Allied effort, but it was often difficult to do so. The State Executive of the ALF debated the matter in March 1916, and decided to “appeal to the authorities to find some means enabling the Italians to get to the front”, but the Defence Department was either unwilling or unable to address the issue.

Nonetheless, the belief that enemy aliens would take the places of Australian soldiers persisted. In November 1916, Vertical warned that “the presence of enemy subjects in our industries is more likely to retard recruiting than anything else that can be mentioned.”

The home front was characterised by heightened tension, and innocent parties were often caught up in the confusion. Peter Callinan wrote to the Westralian Worker to draw attention to an ad published in the daily press: “Interpreter wanted for Greek language, to assist yard foreman, easy job, no corrector. Smith, new mill, Barrabup.” Callinan asked, “Is this a hoax? Surely not… With Greeks we have not necessarily any quarrel, our sympathies as unionists are cosmopolitan and catholic, but the irony of it!” Vertical agreed, insisting that he “has no particular antagonism to white foreigners who happen to be resident in this country. Some of them are our best settlers, and hundreds of them are our best unionists; but this is a time when if there is anything in waving the flag a Britisher should get a look in.” The following week the Worker revealed that it was a hoax. The incident indicates that a certain degree of sensitivity surrounded the issue of migrant labour, particularly when there was a perception that employers were going out

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of their way (such as by hiring an interpreter) to preference foreigners over the British majority. 13

Vertical’s treatment in his column of racial tension amongst the timber workers was in sharp contrast to H.E.J. Foreman’s in Kalgoorlie. The issue was still important enough in November 1916 to warrant an agreement being reached between the Timber Workers’ Union and Millars, the largest company in the industry, to ensure that “Britishers, including naturalised allied aliens, are to have preference of employment”; however, Vertical only raised it briefly and infrequently. 14 His aim, it seems, was to minimise industrial strife at time when thousands of timber workers were already under financial pressure, due to reduced hours or unemployment. Instead of scapegoating foreign workers, he preferred the union’s approach of reserving work for those with family commitments.

**On the waterfront**

Western Australia’s major port of Fremantle was an important locality during the Great War. It provided a link between the home front and the war, as the point of departure for the Australian troops. It was also the site of home front action against the potential German threat. For example, German ships were captured and held at the port, a direct contribution to the war effort of which the local community was proud. On 14 August 1914, the *Westralian Worker* published a front page photograph of “[c]itizen soldiers

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14 *WW*, 3 November 1916, p1.
changing guard over a captured German vessel at Fremantle." The temporary soldiers’ camp on the Fremantle Esplanade was also a temporary holding point for German “prisoners of war”, and the permanent internment camp was on Rottnest Island, a short boat journey from Fremantle.

**Figure 3.** Fremantle was the centre of Western Australia’s wartime activities. This photograph, published on the front page of the *Westralian Worker*, shows the pride of the community in the young men “doing their bit” for the Empire. (*WW*, 14 August 1914, p1.)

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15 *WW*, 14 August 1914, p1. See Figure 3.
It is perhaps unsurprising then, that the Fremantle workers would be among the first caught up in a debate about working alongside enemy aliens. Initially, the problem was raised in connection with the growing tensions on the goldfields. At the Trades Hall Association meeting of 24 November 1914, Mr Kemp passed on a letter from a resident of the fields, claiming that “so far the Federal Government has done nothing” about the employment unnaturalised Austrians, and thought the matter should be raised by the Eastern Goldfields District Council of the ALF. This was agreed, although one delegate pointed out that “most of the so-called Austrians on the fields were Servians [sic] and Montenegrins.” Although the meeting agreed that it was a problem for the goldfields to deal with, there was an element in Fremantle that would not allow inaccurate statements about the immigrants to stand on the record unchallenged.\(^{16}\)

By the end of 1914, however, the Lumpers’ Union had made a decision to act. Its members agreed that they would no longer content themselves to work alongside unnaturalised foreigners. The left wing of the ALF responded, publicly criticising the union’s decision. The first meeting of the Trades Hall Association received a letter from the Lumpers returning fire. The union’s leadership did not support the decision, which had been made as a result of agitation by a rival faction. It is likely that the anti-migrant campaign was part of an attempt to take control of the union. At its half-yearly meeting, held in early January, the Secretary’s position was contested; Frank Rowe, who had served in the position for thirteen years, faced opposition from the “patriotic” group.

\(^{16}\) *WW*, 27 November 1914, p5.
The *Worker*'s anonymous Fremantle columnist was strongly opposed to Rowe's rivals. He published a letter that described them as "these yelling fanatics amongst us", "bluffes" whose hopeless election campaign would "send the union into bankruptcy".\(^{17}\) After the half-yearly meeting, the columnist summed up the controversy in starkly partisan terms:

More than ordinary importance attaches to the half-yearly meeting of the Fremantle Lumpers' Union, which was held on Sunday last. Domestic affairs have been none too smooth since the bad times came, and Sunday's meeting found two factions in camp—those who were prepared to pursue to extremes the course of action recently levelled against members of German and Austrian lineage, and the more moderate section of the union who were inclined to be more broad-minded. The opposition to Frank Rowe, which fortunately for the welfare of the union met with such an ignominious fate, also found its origin in the extremist section.\(^{18}\)

He reported that a ballot would be held to determine whether the questionable decision—which had by now become the subject of legal action—would be allowed to stand, and predicted that it would. It was, by a vote of 422 to 302, with some "rather humorous" informal ballots cast. Again, the *Worker*'s position on the result was clear:

First of all the writer fails to see what benefit the union can derive by depriving twenty fellow unionists of earning a livelihood which we Britshers claim to be the characteristic freedom of the land. The sufferers again are not the nations with whom we have the quarrel, but are the defenceless and, in most instances, Australian born wives and children. The ultimatum has gone forth. The women and children can weep and starve and die as far as 422 members of the Lumpers' are concerned.\(^{19}\)

However, the matter was now "in the hands of the union's solicitors, Messrs. Hill and Penny, who, we understand, have accepted [sic] service of the writs." By April 1915 it had been decided to pay a settlement of £1500 to the foreign workers affected by the work bans, and a significant portion of the membership was angry that it had to pay for the

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\(^{17}\) *WW*, 8 January 1915, p7; 15 January 1915, p4; 22 January 1915, p5.
\(^{18}\) *WW*, 22 January 1915, p5.
\(^{19}\) *WW*, 29 January 1915, p5.
mistakes of the majority. A guest columnist, “Poverty Point,” wrote in the Fremantle column that “[t]here was some 422 lizards and 302 voted that they were not stuck up and would still be willing to work alongside their old pals as had the square’ead names”, and that “some of our chaps reckon that they ain’t going to pay up for the lizards that were led astray by the mugs and voted ‘No’ when the motion went through.” The Lumpers’ Union had found itself in a difficult position—the rank-and-file had supported illegal industrial action against the wishes of popular officials, and the union was now faced with a massive bill for compensation.20

Shortly afterwards, the “Fremantle Doings” column was taken over by “Jack Ashore”. There are no records to indicate how or why this change was made, but the impact is immediately noticeable. The column’s previous strong cosmopolitan position was replaced by snide comments at the expense of German migrants—even naturalised Germans. “WE WANT TO KNOW,” the new writer demanded, “[w]hether a man born in Germany having a son at present fighting the Allies, has German or British sympathies. Or, if a naturalisation paper assures that his feeling is for the people are trying to kill his son.” A few weeks later he demanded to know whether “the All British Association will start operations with pro-Germans at Fremantle where there are at least a few”, and in December he asked “[i]f a German who was naturalised on the day war broke out should enjoy relief from the war distress funds.” It is possible that the column’s authorship was changed in order to more accurately reflect the views of the Fremantle community.

Vitriolic attacks on the foolishness of the majority of the Lumpers’ Union’s members were brave, but probably also foolish. Indeed, there is evidence to support the contention

20 *WW*, 29 January 1915, p5; 30 April 1915, p5.
that popular opinion in the port town was building against the German population, although it is not reflected in the pages of the *Westralian Worker.*

Bill Latter’s account of anti-German riots on Fremantle streets in August 1915, suggests that there was widespread support for drastic action against those perceived as the enemy. News of the Allies’ success in a major naval battle inspired several prominent members of the ABA to organise “a demonstration of public patriotism”. The meeting, held on Monday, 23 August, was three hundred strong at its beginning, but swelled to over a thousand as the night wore on. Fuelled by alcohol and urged on by a series of “inflammatory speeches”, the crowd gathered outside the jeweller’s shop owned by Harriet Kopp and managed by her husband, who was widely known as “German George.” A bottle was hurled from the back of the crowd, smashing one of the shop’s windows. Rocks and stones were thrown at the shop, and at police who tried to arrest the culprits. The crowd split up. A section went around the corner to throw stones at the Federal Hotel, owned by August Fiedler, a Russian who had been the victim of an ABA smear campaign. Another group headed to the Star Hotel, where a woman loaded her apron with lumps of rubble from a broken wall and delivered the missiles to the crowd. Joseph Scherer’s furniture shop was also targeted by a crowd of stone-throwers. Another mob ran to the home of Ludwig Rataazzi, the former Consul for Italy and Germany,

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breaking every window that fronted the street before moving on to bombard the Kopp’s home in East Fremantle.\textsuperscript{23}

There is considerable evidence to suggest that these attacks were premeditated. The bottle-thrower, who turned an angry mob into a violent mob, told police that he had been promised payment of half a sovereign if he broke the window. When an “outback miner”, Connell, was arrested, his pockets were heavy with stones, suggesting that sections of the crowd, at least, gathered with malicious intent. The businesses and homes were not near each other: “Scherer lived about a mile and a half from Wittorf in South Fremantle, Rataazzi lived about a mile from the City centre in an easterly direction and Kopp, another half mile further on, in East Fremantle.” Latter concludes that the night of the stones was probably an example of “propaganda of the deed”: The ABA had a meeting with the Premier on Wednesday, and Monday night’s violence was orchestrated to demonstrate the strength of public feeling against enemy aliens.\textsuperscript{24}

The absence of this incident from the pages of the \textit{Westralian Worker} is notable. The only comment was this question in the issue of 27 August 1915: “Who put the first stone through Kopp’s window.” It is probable that Jack Ashore preferred to ignore the incident than to condemn it. After all, just two months earlier he had urged the ABA to step up its operations against “pro-Germans” in Fremantle. By contrast, the paper’s response to rioting (also organised by patriotic Britishers) during the conscription campaign was forthright denouncement. An editorial declared that “[m]ob rule such as was witnessed on the Perth Esplanade recently is to be reprobated”. The unanimous decision of the Midland

District Council of the ALF to condemn “the illegal and unwarranted action of soldiers in preventing freedom of speech at the anti-conscription meeting on the Esplanade” was reported. After windows were broken in Perth on the eve of the first conscription referendum, a contributor going by the pen name “Polemicus” wondered, “How is it that the collective intelligence of a mob reaches such a low level?”

A similar pattern can be found in Foreman’s Kalgoorlie column. On 6 October 1916, he reported that a group of returned servicemen attacked the home of Richard Krahn. He did not condemn the violence, but noted that Krahn was suspected of being a member of a “German Club” that had “on divers [sic] occasions met to celebrate alleged Hun victories, strafe the Britishers, and in every way keep up the traditions which the emulators of Attila and his followers appear to have imbied with their mothers’ milk.” Foreman also mentioned that “some boxes of cigars and a couple of revolvers” were taken away as legitimate mementos of the raid.” During the conscription debate, however, he insisted that “[o]n the goldfields we have always prided ourselves on our sense of fair play”, and that “[t]he cowardly attack by the conscription mob on Don Cameron in Perth was strongly condemned by all sides on the goldfields.” The Worker’s policy, it seems, was to vociferously condemn mob violence aimed at Britishers, but to give tacit approval to actions directed at so-called suspicious foreigners.

The Westralian Worker’s treatment of Germans and other “enemy aliens” reveals a great deal about its editorial structure. Foreman, in Kalgoorlie, took a tough, vitriolic stance, backing the Miners’ Union and expressing his opinions in the same terms as its leaders.

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His harangues probably contributed significantly to the anti-German hysteria of the
goldfields. The “Timber Topics” column did not express a strong opinion one way or the
other, but offered space for workers to express their concerns. In Fremantle, a columnist
who spoke freely against the Lumpers’ Union was replaced by the more amenable Jack
Ashore—probably by the union rather than the newspaper. As long as they did not too
openly criticise the important local bodies, these columnists were free from a centralised
editorial policy. This presumably allowed the Worker to reflect the interests and attitudes
of a wide range of communities scattered around the state.
Chapter five

A gang of anarchists

The Industrial Workers of the World, a militant anarcho-syndicalist union, were never a major force in Australian politics, but their hardline stance and emphasis on propaganda allowed them to have an influence far beyond their actual membership. Burgmann contends that “although the IWW was organisationally decrepit in 1918, it appears that ‘IWWism’, that body of ideas bequeathed to the working class, still caused alarm in official circles.”1 While the true extent of support for the IWW in the Western Australian labour movement can not be accurately estimated, the Westralian Worker’s treatment of the organisation’s ideas and activities suggest that it was widely regarded as benign and amusing.

Even before the war, the Worker provided space for Wobbly activists to publish their opinions. Michael Sawtell, who would eventually be charged with burning down a Labor Senator’s farm, occasionally penned a letter for publication. In April 1917, he insisted that WA’s unions were undemocratic and timid:

The following is typical of most union reports, and it makes distressing reading:—“Your executive has to report a most successful year; there has been no serious cessation of work since ——. True at one time an industrial upheaval seemed imminent, but, however, ‘wiser and saner counsel’ prevailed, conditions were readjusted ‘satisfactory to both parties,’ and the men are now working in ‘harmony’ with their employers.” That means that the slaves were forced back to work. I am a slave. I am also a member of a union, for which I have the heartiest contempt. Unionism as it stands to-day is “organised scabbery.”2

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1 Burgmann, V. “The Iron Heel”, p181.
2 WW, 17 April 1914, p7.
Sawtell’s views were echoed a year later in a critique penned by “Pessimist”, a delegate to the ALF’s Metropolitan Council of four years’ experience:

A typical meeting of the Council at present goes on the following lines: President Panton smilingly takes the chair, the minutes are then read and confirmed, credentials accepted and delegates welcomed. The President goes through the Executive’s report, and the recommendations, almost without exception, are adopted. But notwithstanding this fact it usually takes about two and a half hours to get through the report, owing to the fact that there is very seldom an item tabled which does not contain reference to some squabble between unions, consequently important business is brought on when delegates are leaving for home, in many cases weary and disgusted.3

The following issue saw a favourable reply from “Observer”, “one of the delegates who for the past five years on and off has represented a union or A.L.F. branch”. He said, “Re the words of warning by ‘Pessimist’, he does not give them too soon.” Even within the labour movement’s active membership, there was a belief that it was too timid, too bureaucratic, and too bogged down in its own petty political disputes.4

Hugh McKeown, who was acquainted with Sawtell but was no fan of his politics, recalled a meeting at which the Wobbly asked J.B. Holman, one-time secretary of the Timber Worker’s Union and Worker director, whether he was a socialist. “Mr. Homan replied that he was in favour of the Socialism of love as taught by Christ, or words to that effect. Now, when I hear a man of Mr. Holman’s standing talk about the Socialism of Christ,” wrote McKeown, “I am certain that he knows nothing about Socialism, or, for reasons of diplomacy, he is hiding his light under a bushel.” He accepted Sawtell’s criticisms of the labour movement’s timid leadership, but was not prepared to chuck in his lot with direct action. “Our business as Socialists is to make more Socialists, a work

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3 WW, 27 August 1915, p2.
4 WW, 3 September 1915, p2.
which I protest against being retarded either by the patronising attitude of Mr. Holman or the fiery enthusiasm of Mr. Sawtell.”

Industrial unionism is an idea that gained a strong foothold in the Australian labour movement, due at least in part to agitation and advocacy by IWW activists. R.J. Edmunds, of Northam, forwarded to the Worker an extract from an article by an American Wobbly organiser, William D. (Bill) Haywood. It forcefully put the case for One Big Union:

Why is it that the striking coal miners (in Colorado) are being driven from their homes, thrown into gaols, sabred by cavalymen, shot down by hired ‘killers’ and robbed of every constitutional right that the land of the free is supposed to guarantee its citizens? A surface reason may be found in the lawless rapacity of the mine operators (‘owners’), but the real cause lies in the selfishness and ignorance of the Colorado working class as a whole. Even while their so-called ‘union brothers’ are fighting for their very lives, starved in ragged wind-swept tents, union trainmen are hauling scab-mined coal to market, union teamsters are delivering it, union engineers are burning it, and in neighboring [sic] States hundreds of other union miners are busily digging away in order that there may be no failure of the coal supply.

On 26 February 1915, the Westralian Worker’s editorial pushed the merits of industrial union, noting that the “new unionism is so logical that it is difficult to see how any objections can be successfully raised against it, either by employers or timid workers.” It went on: “The more ardent spirits in the Labor movement are insisting that the time is ripe for one big union. This is the policy of the A.W.U., and it has much to recommend it. It is the goal towards which we are moving, the objective we have before us.” Other leading ALF figures also endorsed the plan, although Alexander Panton thought they

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5 *WW*, 15 May 1914, p2.
6 *WW*, 31 July 1914, p4.
should be careful that support for “Industrial Unionism” did not give way to support for “Revolutionary Unionism.”

It is certainly true that the Australian Workers’ Union, a moderate workers’ organisation affiliated with the ALF, was the leading proponent of industrial unionism in Australia, but the influence of the Wobblies is also clear. When Panton lectured the Leederville branch of the ALF on industrial unionism, he quite clearly linked the AWU’s proposal to that of the IWW: “In my opinion if the A.W.U. are to be successful they will have eventually to divide their members into industrial sections. The I.W.W. also claim to have solved the problem of industrial unionism... They propose to divide the industries into six departments”. His only objection to their scheme is that it is too great a change: “If I though the theory of the I.W.W. was within reasonable reach, I would not hesitate to throw in my lot with them, but when I think of the amount of education required, the apathy of the rank and file and the selfishness of the leaders of the present craft unions, I look upon the I.W.W. theory as a theory only.” His audience was also sympathetic to the Wobbly scheme. E. Driver “considered that the I.W.W. system was an honest and practicable way of dealing with the position. With the I.W.W. an injury to one was an injury to all.”

The labour movement’s interest in the Wobblies is evident in this and other lectures organised by the Leederville ALF. On 7 January 1916, the Worker declared that “[t]he Leederville branch of the A.L.F. set a splendid example last year in connection of the bill of fare it presented to members.” In addition to A.H. Panton’s talk on industrial unionism,

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7 *Worker*, 26 February 1915, p4; 5 March 1915, p2.
8 *Worker*, 29 October 1915, p3.
the paper had published a report of A.E. Green’s lecture on syndicalism. Its focus was on
the methods used by organisations, such as the IWW, that were organised along
syndicalist lines. He mentioned “the spoiling of tools, bad workmanship, and the ‘go lazy
strike’”, but sabotage generated the most interest. Indeed, Driver was so excited that he
announced that “the I.W.W. was doing a lot of good to bring about industrial reform, but
that the idea of a general strike had gone out of favor. With sabotage the employer or
capitalist was hit, with a general strike the worker suffered most.” His enthusiasm waned,
though, and a month later he recanted, insisting “that he was not a member of the I.W.W.
and did not believe in sabotage as advocated by that society.” It is not hard to imagine
that others less fortunate than Driver would have been attracted to the IWW’s
militancy—we have already seen that Don Cameron, a well-respected advocate on behalf
of the unemployed, was prepared to countenance the use of armed force against a
government that failed to help the growing army of jobless workers.⁹

So well received were the lectures by Green and Panton that the IWW was invited to
address the branch. Charles Reeves took the opportunity to give an impassioned history
of the labour movement as he saw it, and concluded by rejecting political action:

Parliament and trades unions had long out-lived their day of usefulness, the
very environment of Parliament had a tendency to corrupt its members, and the
influence of the capitalist was apparent in all its doings. They talked of the
liberty of the people, the liberty to go bare-footed if they had no boots, or the
liberty to walk if they did not have the money to pay their fare on the State-
owned railway. In the past great empires had grown up out of corruption, but
had decayed away, and so would our present system of government and trades
unions decay and fall away also. They would keep on fighting until such times
as the workers, the real producers, had secured to themselves the benefits of

⁹ IW, 1 October 1916, p6; 29 October 1915, p3; 7 January 1916, p6.
their efforts. This was something to live for, something to fight for, and through the I.W.W. he saw a means of its accomplishment.\(^\text{10}\)

He was “accorded a hearty vote of thanks”, but it is unlikely that his calls to reject politics struck a chord with many of his listeners. The Western Australian labour movement had thrown in its lot with parliamentary action, considering that it was not incompatible with even militant industrial action. J.L. Ford “had vivid recollections of the Maritime strike, which was not many degrees removed from a general strike in which great hardship was inflicted on the workers. From that date they had decided on political action, and it was hard to calculate the amount of benefit the worker had received.”\(^\text{11}\) This was the view taken by many; Foreman responded to the IWW’s activities at Kalgoorlie and Boulder by making the same point:

> Of course, we have those amongst us who have long been of the opinion that much more is to be gained by the unions devoting themselves to industrial matters pure and simple and abandoning the ballot box generally as a remedy for any injustice under which the people may be suffering... Fortunately we have still a number of unionists in this fair country who remember what the old-time struggles were like when not backed up by political action, and how again and again the same fight had to be waged by the workers—oftimes with small success. Then came the era of political action and therein was found the solution of many, but not all, of our troubles. We have no intention of going back to the stone age of industrial work for a time anyhow, I hope.\(^\text{12}\)

By the time the conscription debates had embittered Australian politics (1916-1917), the IWW had been cast as violent and anarchistic criminals. The whole labour movement did not necessarily share that assessment—Tom Barker’s arrest for publishing an anti-conscription cartoon was widely criticised—but the arrests of the Sydney Twelve and various WA Wobblies were briefly reported in the *Worker*.\(^\text{13}\) The paper’s surprise was

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\(^{10}\) *WW*, 10 December 1915, p.2.

\(^{11}\) *WW*, 1 October 1915, p.3.

\(^{12}\) *WW*, 29 January 1915, p.4.

conveyed when Sawtell was charged “with threatening to destroy Senator Lynch’s farm at Three Springs, and to sabotage Labor politicians and employers. Mick is well known in W.A., where most people have regarded him as a harmless visionary.”¹⁴ Later, “Vigilant” suggested that the supposed crimes of the Wobblies were probably grossly exaggerated:

The visit of a couple of “demons” to Narrogin in search of pro-Germans and I.W.W.’s caused all sorts of rumors and the result of their enquiries are anxiously awaited. At the present time anything in the way of sickness, i.e. measles and gout, is spread by the Germans, whilst the poisoning of dogs and cats is set down to the I.W.W.¹⁵

Others, though, were content to smear the IWW in order to secure a referendum win for the conscriptionists. James Burgess suggested that “the ‘Antis’ themselves are associated with the I.W.W.…. Certain members of this organisation are at present under arrest on charges of murder, attempting to destroy buildings, treason, and the forgery of bank notes.” The Worker angrily rejected claims that “Labor has given these misguided fanatics entrance into its councils”, pointing out that because they “DO NOT BELIEVE IN POLITICAL ACTION” the assertion “would be repudiated by the I.W.W. themselves.” It objected “to the movement being mentioned in the same breath as a gang of anarchists who have nothing in common with it.”¹⁶

However, against this vigorous rhetoric is the fact that the Worker was generally sympathetic to the Wobblies. Perhaps the strongest indication that the paper saw the Wobblies as an integral part of the labour movement is the regular publication of letters from Harry M. Leighton, an IWWer and peace activist.¹⁷ Leighton’s defence of Joe

¹⁴ WW, 20 October 1916, p1.
¹⁵ WW, 24 November 1916, p3.
¹⁷ Oliver, B. War and Peace in Western Australia, p95.
Swebleses and subsequent public correspondence with Unionist have already been mentioned. His calls for peace gradually transformed into anti-conscription activism as that debate became more prominent, and his letters were so frequently published that even a brief absence was noticed by readers. On 7 January 1916, M. Moorhouse wrote that “[i]t is some weeks since the letter from Mr. H. M. Leighton on the question of conscription appeared in your columns”. In the same edition, yet another letter from Leighton was included. The fact that Leighton’s contributions were valued so highly by the Worker, and that he successfully held his ground against a series of patriotic and pro-conscription debaters, indicates that the Wobbly contribution to Western Australia’s labour movement was far more extensive than “direct action” propaganda and lawlessness.18

**The conscription debates**19

The most important and challenging debate that faced the labour movement during the Great War was about the desirability of conscription. Western Australia’s labour movement was not immune from the turbulence. J.R. Robertson’s whitewashed view of the period suggests that “Western Australian Labor’s attempts to cope with this catastrophe was framed in the tradition of moderation”, but Bobbie Oliver’s more recent account reveals that while “[t]he majority of the State ALF hoped for a reconciliation now that the conscription referendum had failed”, a significant minority was deeply scarred. Don Cameron, who was surely used to personal attacks made in the name of...

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18 *WW*, 7 January 1916, p4, p5.
19 A full analysis of the conscription debates is beyond the scope of this study. For a broader discussion of the period, see “The Curse of Conscription: The referendum campaigns of 1916 and 1917” in Oliver, B. *War and Peace in Western Australia*, pp90-131.
political debate, declared that he was “no longer a friend of Senator Lynch”, who refused to back down from his claims that, among other things, anti-conscriptionists were being financed by German gold. The fact that the ALF did not split over the substantive issue of support for conscription, but because “Messrs Pearce, Lynch, DeLargie, Henderson, Buzacott and Burchell had severed their connection with the ALF by joining the National Party”, does not indicate the absence of a purge. The anti-conscriptionist State Executive was unable to expel their enemies, but could declare that they had left the movement. It did so enthusiastically.20

It has been noted elsewhere that the Westralian Worker’s editor, John Hilton, was a pro-conscriptionist.21 However there is ample evidence to suggest that his commitment to freedom of speech outweighed his partisanship, and the pages of the journal reflected a wide range of views on the issue. Debate about compulsory military service had long been a point of disagreement in the labour movement. The Fisher Labor Government introduced compulsory military service for teenaged boys, and debate raged on the pages of the Worker. Those who supported the scheme believed that it would give the working classes training in the use of arms, and access to weapons should the need arise. The opponents, led by Jabez Dodd MHR, believed the scheme would inculcate militarism in the populace, and that the boys would be used against striking workers. At the start of the war, this debate died down, although the ALF claimed (during the election campaign)

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20 Robertson, J.R. “The Internal Politics of State Labor in Western Australia, 1911-1916”, p74; Oliver, B. War and Peace in Western Australia, pp107-109.
21 Oliver, B. War and Peace in Western Australia, p97; Gregson, S. “Foot Soldiers for Capital”, p155.
that the introduction of compulsory military training helped prepare Australia for the
conflict.\textsuperscript{22}

In 1915, Dodd, whose ailing health had taken him to England for treatment, wrote home
that conservatives there were “using every means to hasten conscription both for military
and industrial purposes, but the country will not stand it” because “cheaply paid soldiers
will follow, and above all the lever of compulsion will quickly settle freedom.” (He
would later join the conscriptionists after his hotel was bombed by the Germans.) An
extensive rebuttal of conscription by W.A. Appleton of the Federation of Trade Unions of
Great Britain was also published. These reports started a debate about conscription in
Australia. Harry Leighton and other members of the Peace Alliance took up the “anti”
case, while their opponents considered that conscription should not be ruled out as a
future option. The North Fremantle ALF submitted a report about “the best discussion
we’ve ever had at a branch meeting” over conscription. The \textit{Worker} realised that this was
a topic of tremendous importance, and fostered discussion by inviting the Minister for
External Affairs, Hugh Mahon, to write a column opposing conscription.\textsuperscript{23}

Throughout 1916 the \textit{Westralian Worker}’s pages were used by both supporters and
opponents of conscription to advocate their position. M. Moorhouse wrote that “[m]en in
the trenches and returned soldiers say that everyone who can do military duty should be
compelled to do it; the gallant stay-at-homes say ‘Don’t compel us to go.’” D. Spiers
agreed that “the principal ones who are fighting for [voluntarism] are the shirkers.”

\textsuperscript{22} \textit{WW}, 1 May 1914, p1; 15 May 1914, p11; 22 May 1914, p11; 12 June 1914, p2, p7; 28 August 1914, p5.
The actions of the Botha regime in South Africa, in using the armed forces against strikers, were
particularly worrying. See, for example, \textit{WW}, 23 January 1914, p7; 30 January 1914, p2.
\textsuperscript{23} \textit{WW}, 6 August 1915, p3; 13 August 1915, p3; 15 October 1915; 29 October 1915, p2; 19 November
1915, p4; 3 December 1915, p8; 17 December 1915, p8; 7 January 1916, p5.
“Cabell” argued that conscription was unnecessary—the problem was not a lack of soldiers, but a lack of equipment and artillery. Foreman vowed to oppose conscription as long as foreigners were allowed to work on the mines.24

There was universal acceptance of the need to “conscript wealth”, though whether to do this by raising taxes or nationalising industry was not settled. John Hilton confined his editorial discussion to this point, noting that “it is incumbent upon those who favor the principle to endeavor to formulate some workable scheme” and proposing “[a] super tax upon incomes, accompanied by an increased tax upon unimproved land values, seems the most feasible way.”25 When the plebiscite was announced, Hilton refused to back one side or the other. He penned a leading article that summarised the ALF’s position:

A motion was submitted that the [State] Executive urge all Laborites to vote No on the referendum, but after a lengthy and animated debate this was defeated by the narrow majority of two votes—the figures being 18 to 16.

Nor is this division of opinion confined to the State Executive, for there is evidence that a similar sharp cleavage exists throughout the country. In the metropolitan area we find the Midland Districts Council pronouncing solidly against conscription, while at Fremantle the decision was almost equally emphatic in supporting the action of Congress in expressing confidence in the Federal Government.26

The situation meant that “this paper can see no alternative but to leave the matter an open question, since it cannot speak authoritatively on behalf of the whole,” and accordingly “[w]e intend to throw our columns open for the full expression of opinion on both sides

24 WW, 7 January 1916, p5; 14 January 1916, p2; 4 April 1916, p2; 2 June 1916, p6.
26 WW, 6 October 1916, p4.
of the question". However, it is unlikely that this gesture was merely a magnanimous gesture in support of free speech.

Anti-conscriptionists had for some time been angry with the Worker's position. It had published a fawning description of Billy Hughes as "a fitting representative of Australia, for he expresses the determination of the Commonwealth to do its best to secure the condign punishment of shameless treaty-breakers and cold-blooded murderers."

Following the 1916 Congress, Hilton adopted the official position: "This paper does not believe that conscription will be necessary, and feels certain that William Hughes, George Pearce, and their colleagues, will not resort to such a step, unless profoundly convinced of its necessity." This was the stance taken by the conscriptionists; although they had not succeeded in securing an endorsement for conscription, they argued that the decision of Congress was final. On 25 August, Hilton argued that "it is greatly to be regretted that steps have since been taken to impugn that body's authority and to set its conclusions at naught." The anti-conscriptionists were incensed; they saw it as an attempt to close down discussion of a contentious issue.

The Midland District Council condemned the sub leader as "an attempt to stifle discussion by Councils, Branches or other Labor bodies on the question of Conscription."

John Hilton was allowed to reply to their criticism; he argued that "necessitates of the case sometimes necessitated [sic] the ignoring of ethical points in order to preserve unity and make efficient working possible", and fielded some questions about conscription.29

27 WW, 6 October 1916, p4.
29 Midland District Council minutes, 30 August 1916; 13 September 1916.
However, Hilton did not satisfy their concerns, as this extract from the minutes of the following meeting attest:

W. Manning took exception to the minutes of the previous meeting re account of visit of J. Hilton, Editor of the Worker. A. Genders moved that the minutes be altered to show that hostile criticism had been directed against Mr Hilton and the Worker, principally re treatment of the subject of conscription. Carried. 30

This pressure clearly influenced Hilton’s change of heart, as his declaration of free speech admitted that “many, even of those who supported the resolution at Congress, are now of the opinion that … the resolution is valid no longer.” 31

Although the anti-conscriptionists were given ample space to express their views, it was not equal space. On 13 October 1916, a “Special Notice” was published reiterating the Worker’s “free speech” policy, but it added that “[t]he case for conscription is published this week under arrangement with the National Referendum Committee.” It was given a two-page spread. No similar arrangements were made for the anti-conscription case during the campaign. 32

Following the referendum, and during the turmoil surrounding Labor’s split, the anti-conscriptionists steeled their resolve to take control of the ALF. The Westralian Worker was an essential part of that push, and around October 1916 the board began to search for a replacement for Hilton. In January the following year, Hilton resigned, and accused the anti-conscription board of victimising him; Alex McCallum, one of the directors, responded by explaining that the Worker Company “had decided to dispense with Mr.

30 Midland District Council minutes, 27 September 1916. The Westralian Worker published a report of this meeting, but ignored the criticism of Hilton. (WW, 6 October 1916, p6.)
31 WW, 6 October 1916, p4.
32 WW, 13 October 1916, p4.
Hiltons [sic] services, as far back as July 28, 1915, and again in September and November in the same year”. Hilton had been the subject of several complaints of “literary weakness”, including from “a number of prominent conscriptionists, such as Mr. Dennis, secretary of the Australian Engineers.”

However Hilton’s claims were probably correct. Five of the six directors were anti-conscriptionists, and the AWU had been absorbing smaller unions throughout the war, gaining a significant shareholding in the Westralian Worker. It “demanded a more militant policy.” In November, the board of directors passed a motion impressing upon Hilton that “nothing less than unconditional observance of majority rule in the matter of leadership of the party will be accepted.” He promised to “put more ginger into the production”, but failed to satisfy the unions. In the end, from a large field of prospective candidates, the Victorian anti-conscription campaigner John Curtin was hired to replace him. Curtin’s impact on the paper was immediate—in a style he had perfected during the bitter Victorian campaign, he devoted every available column inch to condemning Billy Hughes and the Nationalist “rats”. The divisions in the WA labour movement were so deep and so bitter that the Westralian Worker could no longer feasibly act as a mere reflector of public opinion. The time to plead for reconciliation was past; the new editor was determined to project his strongly-held views onto the ALF.

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34 W.D. Johnson, P. O’Loghlen, M.F. Troy, A. McCallum and W. Somerville were opposed to conscription, while J.B. Holman was in favour. (WW, 9 February 1917, p6.) Hearn, M. and Knowles, H. One Big Union: A History of the Australian Workers Union 1886-1994. Melbourne: Cambridge, 1996, pp125-133; Ross, L. John Curtin, p58; WW, 17 November 1916, p4. For detailed discussion of Curtin’s time as editor of the
The *Worker*'s response to the conscription debates reveal the extent of the schism within the party. As the gap between the labour movement's conservatives and radicals widened, John Hilton tried to keep one of the paper's feet in each of the camps. It might have been possible to achieve that goal with a group like the Wobblies, on the fringes of the movement, but it was not feasible when the division went to the core of the ALF. Ultimately, one side or other was bound to take control.

*Westralian Worker*, see Black, D. *In His Own Words*; Day, D. *John Curtin*; Sholl, D. "John Curtin at the Westralian Worker".
Conclusion

A systematic analysis of the Westralian Worker’s wartime coverage illuminates some interesting aspects of its relationship to Western Australian society at the time. The contours of the labour movement are thrown into relief; the Australian Labor Federation’s various divisions and detractors become real. In a time of great disagreement, the Westralian Worker found itself trapped between a journal of record’s need to reflect the debates and divisions that existed, and a labour organ’s desire to maintain unity by projecting a particular attitude onto the movement. It appears to have adopted several strategies in order to overcome this difficulty.

The most striking aspect of John Hilton’s editorship is the lack of a central editorial policy. We can see from the paper’s response to “enemy aliens” that its various columnists were given great freedom to adopt their own position. H.E.J. Foreman, the manager of the Worker’s Kalgoorlie office, used his independence to champion “preference to Britishers”. He had the powerful mining unions behind him, and occasionally expressed himself in terms that were strikingly similar to their officials’ public utterances, but his forthright condemnation of “pro-Germans” would certainly have contributed to the general xenophobic atmosphere on the goldfields. While Vertical did not use “Timber Topics” to the same effect, his columns certainly allowed disgruntled workers to put their case against foreigners.

The Fremantle column appears, prima facie, to be an exception to this general rule of local freedom, its columnist having been replaced for criticising the Lumpers’ Union. However there is no indication that Hilton was involved in finding a replacement. The
columnist had rubbed against the grain of local opinion, and was shuffled off in favour of somebody more amenable to the community. The Lumpers were not looking for a waterside Foreman to trumpet the union’s position from his column (apart from a few casual remarks, Jack Ashore did not discuss with “enemy aliens”), but they would not allow someone to use the *Westralian Worker* to campaign against them. The importance of keeping local trade unions onside is clear. By using its various columns to respond to the interests of different industries and regions, the *Worker* maintained relevance across the a state two-and-a-half times as big as Britain, France, Germany and Belgium combined.

The other cases considered in this thesis show that the paper was very accommodating of minority views. Occasionally Hilton angrily responded (such as to Lilian Foxcroft’s criticisms), and at other times he denied that those views belonged in the labour movement (the IWW), but his continued acceptance and publication of their correspondence demonstrated a broad tolerance. The left wing of the labour movement was not as strong in Western Australia as on the other side of the continent, and relied to a certain extent on the goodwill of the dominant conservatives to make its view heard. It is ironic, then, that the beneficiaries of Hilton’s relatively open editorial policies would turn against him by the end of the war.

Of course, they appreciated the power of propaganda, and needed to secure control of the *Westralian Worker* if they were to have any hope of controlling the labour movement; but their attitude also reflects the deepening of latent rifts within the ALF. Throughout the war the socialists had been marginalised and accused of treason, but it was during the conscription debates—in which thousands of ordinary workers supported the left’s
position—that these injuries began to scar. Hilton tried to shift the *Worker*’s weight behind the conscriptionist position; doing so secured his fate. It was at this point that the anti-conscriptionists moved against him, pressuring him to take a militant stance and seeking a replacement editor. When John Curtin arrived, he would not follow Hilton’s conservative approach—the press was a powerful tool, hard-won by labour, to be wielded by the movement’s vanguard.

This thesis serves as a caution to labour historians. It is tempting to treat newspapers—particularly labour papers—as perfect artefacts, as if the mood of the working classes was forever frozen in their pages. But they are like icebergs; while the visible tip certainly offers us some valuable information, the truth is far bigger, obscured in the murky depths below. It is only when we interrogate the source that we can understand to what extent the publication was an observer, and to what extent it was an active agent in the controversies of the day. Who controlled the flow of information? Why were certain issues foregrounded? How were dissenting opinions treated? Frequently, labour papers represented only the dominant voice in the labour movement. At other times, they pushed the views of one tiny faction or another. But sometimes, like the *Westralian Worker* during the Great War, they were sitting on the rail.
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