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

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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. 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”.

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 Gibbney.” 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.  

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.”  

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.” 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”. Such publications are so clearly sectional that they are unlikely to form the basis for any movement-wide generalisation.

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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’”.  

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”.13 It was only later, when “the price the war was extracting gradually became evident, the early enthusiasms gave way to war-weariness and the community divided on many matters connected with the war—divisions which lasted to the end of the war and afterwards.”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.”15

The most comprehensive study of the Western Australian home front during World War I is presented by Bobbie Oliver in her War and Peace in Western Australia: The Social and Political Impact of the Great War 1914-1926.16 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

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14 Gollan, R. 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. 17

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. 18

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

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".\textsuperscript{24}

"A Flower that Refused to Bloom" significantly expands on the sketch provided by Cain.\textsuperscript{25} 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."\textsuperscript{26} 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."\textsuperscript{27} 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."\textsuperscript{28}

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 \textit{Westralian Worker} of a vocal minority of the labour movement suffering under the full weight of the state's pressure.

\textsuperscript{24} Cain, F. \textit{The Wobblies at War}, p15, p40, pp146-148.
\textsuperscript{25} Mitchell, F. "'A Flower that Refused to Bloom': The Industrial Workers of the World in Western Australia 1914-1918". \textit{Labour History}, no.19.
\textsuperscript{26} Mitchell, F. "A Flower that Refused to Bloom", p16.
\textsuperscript{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".\(^3^4\) 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.\(^3^5\) 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."\(^3^6\) 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.\(^3^7\)

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

\(^3^4\) Robertson, J.R. "The Internal Politics of State Labor in Western Australia, 1911-1916"., p74.
\(^3^6\) Williams, P.B. "Conscription and the ALP: Observations on the 1916 Congress." Undergraduate essay, entry for the Lee Steere Award, 1986.
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”.\textsuperscript{38} 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.”\textsuperscript{39}

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.”\textsuperscript{40} However “the ACL made little 
headway, even within the labour movement”.\textsuperscript{41} 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 \textit{Westralian Worker}’s columns for the free expression of

\textsuperscript{39} Oliver, B. \textit{War and Peace in Western Australia}, pp92-93.
\textsuperscript{40} Oliver, B. \textit{War and Peace in Western Australia}, p95.
\textsuperscript{41} Oliver, B. \textit{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.\footnote{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
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 Sweblees; 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 Worker to argue for the expulsion of the Nationalists.\footnote{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
Westralian Worker has been discussed at length elsewhere, but this dissertation will
consider the reasons for his appointment.\footnote{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

\footnote{44} Oliver, B. \textit{War and Peace in Western Australia}, p94, pp106-109.  
\footnote{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.