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

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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.¹ 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.²

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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.”

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.  

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.\footnote{\textit{WW}, 15 May 1914, p10; 22 May 1914, p6.}

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.\footnote{\textit{WW}, 21 August 1914, p8; 4 September 1914, p4.} 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
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 undedifying 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

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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, p.3.
12 *WW*, 5 February 1915, p.5.
13 *WW*, 12 February 1915, p.2.
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:

[W]hile 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 

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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.” 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.

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."\(^{20}\) 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.\(^{21}\)

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.”\(^{22}\) 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.’”\(^{23}\) 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 Sweblesses, 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. Sweblesses 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, Sweblesses 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

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 Sweblesses 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.)

25 WW, 23 April 1915, p.2.
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.” 28 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”. 29

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.” 30 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.
30 WW, 14 May 1915, p4.
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 Swebleses, 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...

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\(^{31}\) *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.)
Several of Swebles’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.”

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. 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.

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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.

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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.37

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 peacemiks 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.”38

The most persistent of Sweebleses’ 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.”39 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.40 Leighton’s persistent letter-writing campaign demonstrated a keen understanding of the power of the press to disseminate

37 WW, 28 May 1915, p5.
38 WW, 21 May 1915, p3.
39 WW, 7 January 1916, p5.
40 WW, 13 August 1915, p3; 22 October 1915, p6.
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),

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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”.