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

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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.  

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 within’ somethin’ I calla the dam sciolle. He reckon that th’ Sta’s 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 Oosthra or fiddin’ for the kundtry. Mighta be you more bedder thoos Mishia Cornstalk fiddin for the kundtry.  

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.  

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

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2 *WW*, 8 January 1915, p5; 5 February 1915, p5; 14 August 1914, p4.
4 *WW*, 1 April 1915, p4.
original order. And so coincidence still kept the foreigners cutting on Crown lands.\textsuperscript{5}

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. \textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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.”\textsuperscript{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

\textsuperscript{5} WW, 1 April 1915, p4.  
\textsuperscript{6} WW, 1 April 1915, p4.  
\textsuperscript{7} WW, 23 April 1915, p5.  
\textsuperscript{8} 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 focussed 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.  
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, Barrabupp.” 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.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{14} His aim, it seems, was to minimise industrial strife at a 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

\textsuperscript{13} *WW*, 16 July 1915, p2; 23 July 1915, p5; 30 July 1915, p2.

\textsuperscript{14} *WW*, 3 November 1916, p1.
changing guard over a captured German vessel at Fremantle.\textsuperscript{15} 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.

\textbf{Figure 3.} Fremantle was the centre of Western Australia's wartime activities. This photograph, published on the front page of the \textit{Westralian Worker}, shows the pride of the community in the young men "doing their bit" for the Empire. (\textit{WW}, 14 August 1914, p1.)

\textsuperscript{15} \textit{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.\textsuperscript{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.

\textsuperscript{16} \textit{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", "bluffers" 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 Britishers 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 Fieler, 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 Ratazzi, 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.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 Wittorff 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.24

The absence of this incident from the pages of the 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[?]”\(^{25}\)

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 imbibed 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.\(^{26}\)

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.

\(^{25}\) *WW*, 18 June 1915, p5; 27 August 1915, p4; 6 October 1916, p4, p6; 3 November 1916, p3.  
\(^{26}\) *WW*, 6 October 1916, p8; 13 October 1916, p8.
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.