2003

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

Robert P. Corr

University of Notre Dame Australia

Follow this and additional works at: http://researchonline.nd.edu.au/theses

Part of the Australian Studies Commons, and the History Commons

COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA
Copyright Regulations 1969

WARNING
The material in this communication may be subject to copyright under the Act. Any further copying or communication of this material by you may be the subject of copyright protection under the Act.
Do not remove this notice.

Publication Details

This dissertation/thesis is brought to you by ResearchOnline@ND. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses by an authorized administrator of ResearchOnline@ND. For more information, please contact researchonline@nd.edu.au.
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." 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."  

---

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

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."\(^5\)

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.\(^6\)

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

---

\(^5\) *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,

---

7 *WW*, 26 February 1915, p4; 5 March 1915, p2.
8 *WW*, 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 WW, 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.\(^{10}\)

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.”\(^{11}\) 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.\(^{12}\)

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*.\(^ {13}\) The paper’s surprise was

\(^{10}\) *WW*, 10 December 1915, p2.

\(^{11}\) *WW*, 1 October 1915, p3.

\(^{12}\) *WW*, 29 January 1915, p4.

\(^{13}\) *WW*, 12 May 1916, p5; 26 May 1916, p2; 21 July 1916, p6; 13 October 1916, p1; 20 October 1916, p1; 24 November 1916, p1.
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 debates19

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

---

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 \textit{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 \textit{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)

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

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 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.  

Throughout 1916 the 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."

---

22 *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, *WW*, 23 January 1914, p7; 30 January 1914, p2.
“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
convincing 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 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 attests:

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.
Hilton’s [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.

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”. 