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

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Conclusion

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

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

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

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

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

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