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## Harbouring discontent: Activism in 1930s Fremantle

Paul Reilly

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**Harbouring Discontent**  
Activism in 1930s Fremantle

Paul Reilly



Thesis



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# Harbouring Discontent

*Activism in 1930s Fremantle*

A thesis submitted in the partial fulfilment of a  
**Master of Philosophy**

Paul Reilly  
The University of Notre Dame Australia  
November 2018



# DECLARATION OF AUTHORSHIP

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I declare that this Research Project is my own and contains work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

Paul Reilly

20 November 2018



# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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I would like to acknowledge the generous support, guidance and time provided by my two supervisors, Deborah Gare and Charlie Fox. Without them this work would not have been completed.

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# Introduction

## A COMMUNITY IN CRISIS

### WESTERN AUSTRALIA IN THE 1930S

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The government promised us food and here we are starving.<sup>1</sup>

The appearance of two starving men at the Fremantle Magistrate's Court in 1932 was not unique. Unemployed and desperate, with hungry and homeless families, they had taken themselves to Perth to throw stones at the windows of government buildings to bring attention to their plight. The response of the sitting magistrate to their vandalism was unsympathetic and the men received a one-month sentence in Fremantle Prison. The two, John Bunce (47) and Alfred Burt (19), were British nationals. Bunce had been a stretcher-bearer in the Great War and was prepared to do any work, provided it was adequately paid to keep his family. Once in prison they began a brief hunger strike, hoping to force the government's hand in supporting the families' return to Britain—though economic conditions there were equally bad. The families had been evicted from their homes in South Fremantle and Palmyra, with the Burts' furniture being abandoned on the street. His family, forced to camp on the Fremantle Esplanade, were taken in by a local restaurant and fed. They had daubed slogans on the front of their former home, including the words of the socialist song: *The Red Flag*. The men's hunger strike ended when the government refused their demands. Following the publicity surrounding the episode, and the completion of the prison sentences, the families disappeared from the public eye; it is likely they continued to endure years of economic hardship, like others.

The experience of the two families provides historians with a powerful insight into the story of Western Australia during the Great Depression. It was an era of severe poverty for many and the period featured occurrences of community anger and dissent, as well as government reaction and political repression. This landscape is at odds with the established narrative about the Depression by historians Geoffrey Bolton and Frank Crowley: that social relations in Western Australia were consensual, and that people shared the pain of tough economic years in the 1920s and 1930s. This narrative has since been contested by other historians, including Jenny Gregory and Charlie Fox.

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<sup>1</sup> "Stones hurled through plate glass windows". *The Daily News*, January 15<sup>th</sup> 1932, 1.

## Introduction

According to Stuart Macintyre, Australia experienced a period of economic growth, consumerism and optimism in the 1920s. Leisure activities and new consumer products, such as electrical goods, cars, radio, cinema and music, changed the social landscape.<sup>2</sup> Yet, for many, the “Jazz Age”, as the 1920s came to be known, was a period of bereavement, grinding poverty and unemployment, which worsened considerably as the Great Depression began in 1929. To varying degrees these social, economic and political conditions affected all Australian communities, as has been shown in local histories such as John Lack’s work on Footscray in Victoria, and Susannah Thompson’s history of Victoria Park in Western Australia.<sup>3</sup> It is my intention to appraise and understand Fremantle’s experience of the 1930s, particularly examples of community activism.

### *Western Australia in the 1930s*

The after-effects of the Great War were felt keenly in Western Australia. One of the greatest challenges faced by the state in the 1920s was the repatriation of 23,700 servicemen, of which 15,900 had sustained injuries.<sup>4</sup> The impact of repatriation persisted well into the 1930s: Marina Larsson notes that many returned soldiers continued to receive Commonwealth disability pensions even at the outbreak of World War Two.<sup>5</sup> It is not surprising that, with the added impact of economic depression, Western Australia’s history of the 1930s was marked by political and social volatility.

The poverty experienced by many in the 1920s was worsened by the collapse of international credit at the end of 1929, and the austerity measures introduced by the state and national governments. In 1930, Australia’s federal and state governments were given a stern lecture by Otto Niemeyer, the former British Treasury official and, at that time, Bank of England official and a member of the League of Nations’ finance committee, who urged them to cut public spending.<sup>6</sup> State premiers duly obliged and with the Federal Government, developed the Premiers’ Plan, a three-year deflationary program of wage reductions and cuts in public expenditure.<sup>7</sup> In January 1931, the Commonwealth Arbitration Court cut wage awards by 10%,

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<sup>2</sup> Stuart Macintyre, *A Concise History of Australia*, Third Edition, (Port Melbourne, Victoria: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 172.

<sup>3</sup> John Lack, *A History of Footscray*, (North Melbourne: Hargreen Publishing Company, 1991).

Susannah Thompson, *Beyond Matta Gerup: A History of Victoria Park*, (Town of Victoria Park, W.A. 6979: Town of Victoria Park, 2012).

<sup>4</sup> Bobbie Oliver, *War and Peace in Western Australia: The Social and Political Impact of the Great War 1914-1926*, (Nedlands, Western Australia 6709: University of Western Australia Press, 1995), 133.

<sup>5</sup> Marina Larsson, *Shattered Anzacs: Living with the Scars of War*, (Kensington: UNSW Press, 2009), 18.

<sup>6</sup> G.C. Bolton, *A Fine Country to Starve In*, (Perth, W.A.: University of Western Australia in association with Edith Cowan University, 1994), 112.

<sup>7</sup> Frank Bongiorno, "Search for a Solution, 1923-39", In *The Cambridge History of Australia*, edited by Alison Bashford and Stuart Macintyre, (Port Melbourne, Victoria: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 75.

and in some cases more, and in the same month the Australian pound was devalued by 25%.<sup>8</sup> These measures were introduced at a time when overseas borrowing had significantly increased to pay for public works and infrastructure projects, including the Sydney Harbour Bridge, as urban centres grew with migration from rural towns.<sup>9</sup> In Western Australia, in line with the Premiers' Plan, a finance committee imposed cuts of 20% in state pay and pensions.<sup>10</sup>

The crisis and its management led to a collapse of prices. Revenue raised by important wool and wheat exports halved by early 1930.<sup>11</sup> James Mitchell's coalition government of the Nationalist and Country Parties was over-reliant on agricultural growth and unable to adapt to these extreme circumstances; the working-class therefore endured the consequences for the remainder of the Depression years. Soaring unemployment caused by a collapse in demand, inadequate state support, repression of protest and a strident rejection of reasonable demands made by trade unions and the unemployed, became the hallmarks of the government and a Premier who were out of their depth.<sup>12</sup>

Repression of unemployed and worker protests by the state government in managing the unemployed, revealed both the inadequacy of the Premiers' Plan in solving the crisis fairly and the class divide in Western Australian society. Backlash and protest by workers was controlled by police intervention, monitoring of political organisations, and harassment of activists—measures intended to stifle political opportunity and mobilisation. The Labor Party and trade union leaders also failed to adequately support or lead activists; where activism flourished it was frequently in spite of, not because of, the Labor leadership, which was often against them.

One of the main planks in the Mitchell government's response to managing unemployment and the risk of unrest was to organise remote work camps for unemployed men, where they worked on land clearing projects for meagre top-ups to their sustenance pay. Not only did this work occupy idle men but, importantly for the government, it moved them to country areas where they were out of sight and marginalised from organised workers in the metropolitan area. The camps often had poor water supplies, sanitation, accommodation, food and clothing. Working camps were established at Blackboy Hill (a former army training camp on the road to Mundaring), Harvey, Frankland River and other sites in the southwest. Desperate men accepted

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<sup>8</sup> Macintyre, *A Concise History of Australia*, 178.

<sup>9</sup> Macintyre, *A Concise History of Australia*, 171.

<sup>10</sup> S. Bennett, *Pocket Year Book of Western Australia, W.A. State Government*, (Perth: F.W. Simpson, 1932), 111.

<sup>11</sup> David J. Potts, *The Myth of the Great Depression*, (Carlton North, Vic: Scribe Publications, 2009), 7.

<sup>12</sup> Bolton, *A Fine Country*, 223.

## Introduction

such work, though many were ill equipped for hard labour and the wholly inadequate living conditions.

In June 1930 Blackboy Hill was the first work camp to be established by the government, with 1000 men sent there one month later.<sup>13</sup> By the end of the Mitchell era, 60% of Western Australian men on unemployment sustenance payments were working on government projects, including work on these camps. By 1935, under a Labor government and after the worst of the Depression, that figure had risen to 95%, despite the closure of the worst of the work camps, including Blackboy Hill and Frankland River.<sup>14</sup>

Partly as a result of these harsh strategies, and its poor management of the economic crisis, Mitchell's government was soundly defeated at the 1933 state election. Labor's Phillip Collier was installed as premier for a second time, having previously held the position between 1924 and 1930. Mitchell endured the added humiliation of also losing his Northam seat. Strangely though, this discontent and frustration saw the electorate vote on the same day, by a margin of two to one, in favour of secession from the Commonwealth of Australia. This peculiar episode and apparent contradiction by the electorate, given Labor's anti-secession stance, reveals the disorienting effect of the economic depression: Western Australians felt remote from, and neglected by the eastern states and Canberra. The Depression experience, inadequate government responses and the perception of unfair treatment towards Western Australia, drove voters to support secession, even if it was only a desperate protest vote.

The idea that Western Australia was being manipulated by the east was fuelled in August 1931 when Mitchell, without consultation, handed over the assets of the State Savings Bank to the Commonwealth Bank. This move threatened a run on the bank, provoked cabinet resignations, and led to the formation of the pro-secessionist Dominion League.<sup>15</sup> The League began to push for a referendum on the issue in the build-up to the 1933 state election. H.K. Watson, its chairman, interrogated candidates of all parties regarding their views on the matter and sought their support for a public vote.<sup>16</sup> The *Westralian Worker*, Labor's newspaper, described the League as a "garrulous clique", and their leadership as "self-glorified non-entities".<sup>17</sup> However, despite this dismissive attitude, the movement gained momentum. In March

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<sup>13</sup> Bobbie. Oliver, *Unity Is Strength: A History of the Australian Labor Party and the Trades and Labor Council in Western Australia*, (Curtin University of Technology, Perth: API Network, 2003), 128.

<sup>14</sup> G.D. Snooks, "Development in Adversity, 1913 to 1946", In *A New History of Western Australia*, edited by C.T. Stannage, (Nedlands, Western Australia 6009: University of Western Australia Press, 1981), 264.

<sup>15</sup> David Black, "The Era of Labour Ascendancy, 1924-1947", In *A New History of Western Australia*, edited by C.T. Stannage, (Nedlands, W.A.: University of Western Australia Press, 1981), 420.

<sup>16</sup> "Secession Issue Raised". *The West Australian*, January 12<sup>th</sup> 1932, 8.

<sup>17</sup> "A Secessionist Squeeze", and "Men and Matters". *Westralian Worker*, January 22<sup>nd</sup> 1932, 3.

1933, the National Party conference held a noisy debate on a motion, moved by Watson, calling on the state government to arrange a referendum. The motion was carried.<sup>18</sup>

Attempts were made by some business groups, such as the Primary Producers' Association, to defuse the secession movement by calling for tariffs on east coast imports to Western Australia, to allow greater financial control *within* the Commonwealth. Previous royal commissions had reported that the state was materially disadvantaged in its trade with the east.<sup>19</sup> Secession was actively promoted by the *Sunday Times* newspaper,<sup>20</sup> which even ran a competition for readers to submit an essay: "How Western Australians would prosper *out* of the Federation". The first prize was £5, which was more than the basic weekly wage.<sup>21</sup>

Under pressure, Collier agreed to a referendum, provided that two questions were asked of voters: one questioned their support for secession, while the other offered, instead, Commonwealth constitutional reform.<sup>22</sup> In February, Mitchell predicted a win for secessionists but claimed that the Kalgoorlie goldfields would "save Australia".<sup>23</sup> The *Westralian Worker* derided Mitchell for his comments,<sup>24</sup> but workers were abandoning party loyalty on this issue and Labor's anti-secessionist policy was out of step with the general mood.

Though the resounding referendum result was taken to both Canberra and London for approval, the issue withered on the vine in the following years. In 1933 the *Sunday Times* howled that the parliamentary committee formed to address secession had not even met and that the issue was "being shelved".<sup>25</sup> As the economy slowly recovered and as fears of another war—and of Western Australia's vulnerability—grew, interest in the cause faded. The peculiar story of Western Australian secessionism may have fizzled out, but to historians it provides a means with which to interpret the state's experience of the 1930s: with the failure of the Mitchell government, in the absence of a radical socialist platform by Labor, and with just a tiny Communist Party of limited influence, secession offered Western Australians an opportunity for protest. That the issue was later championed during the brief life of the so-called National Socialist Party of Western Australia, instigated by W.G. Tracey (which appears to have lived and died in the 1930s), only makes the episode more peculiar.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> "Secession". *The West Australian*, March 24<sup>th</sup> 1932, 18.

<sup>19</sup> "Primary Producers". *The West Australian*, August 19<sup>th</sup> 1932, 14.

<sup>20</sup> "Case for Secession". *The Sunday Times*, June 24<sup>th</sup> 1932, 14.

<sup>21</sup> "Secession Essay". *The Sunday Times*, January 22<sup>nd</sup> 1933, 7.

<sup>22</sup> "Give the People the Right to Choose". *Westralian Worker*, December 16<sup>th</sup> 1932, 1.

<sup>23</sup> "Federation Too Costly". *The Daily News*, February 1<sup>st</sup> 1933, 1.

<sup>24</sup> "This 'Prosperous' State". *Westralian Worker*, February 10<sup>th</sup> 1933, 4.

<sup>25</sup> "Secession Shelved". *Sunday Times*, October 8<sup>th</sup> 1933, 7.

<sup>26</sup> "Blue Shirts are being organised in Perth". *The Daily News*, May 20<sup>th</sup> 1936, 1.



## Introduction

Despite the “National” tag in the association’s name, Tracey opportunistically latched on to the cause of state secession. “One of the first steps will be to rid the state of the octopus of federation”, Tracey declared.<sup>27</sup> Yet his intention to parade large numbers of blue-shirted men in Perth came to nothing. He planned for the distribution of 500 shirts to men who could not afford them, but he also acknowledged that men were reluctant to wear them for fear of dismissal and rejection from unionised workplaces. The organisation disappeared from view by the outbreak of the Second World War, despite earlier defiant statements that they would resist state attempts to suppress them.<sup>28</sup> It would appear though, that public indifference and hostility, rather than government suppression, was its undoing.

The state Labor Party was fortunate in the 1930s, as it sat in opposition during the worst of the Depression and came to power as economic conditions began to improve. Unemployment slowly fell and the state’s economy was boosted by the rise in gold prices. The price of gold rose by 131% in the 1930s, as international demand for gold as a form of financial security increased, and this reignited the mining industry in Western Australia. The boom brought much-needed revenue from exports throughout the latter half of the decade and employment in goldmining increased by over 100% between 1932 and 1935.<sup>29</sup> Western Australia’s export earnings from gold, arising from this demand, rose steeply from 4% in 1927-28, to 45% by 1938-39.<sup>30</sup>

There were, at the same time, other signs of economic and social recovery. Marriage rates improved after a nadir in the early 1930s, while house building began to recover as the goldfields increased demand and the larger towns and metropolitan area grew.<sup>31</sup> Linkage effects from the goldfields stimulated demand in other industries, such as timber and cement production, as well as the effects of extra spending that resulted in a boost to industries like dairy.<sup>32</sup> As a result the average unemployment rate in Western Australia between 1934-39 was 8.9%, compared with 12.3% nationally.<sup>33</sup> Improvements for workers were therefore mostly related to the economic turnaround rather than radical political vision.

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<sup>27</sup> “Nazis invite Jews to join party but Rabbi sounds warning”. *The Daily News*, May 21<sup>st</sup> 1936, 1.

<sup>28</sup> “Local Nazis would defy any attempt by State to suppress them”. *The Daily News*, July 9<sup>th</sup> 1936, 3.

<sup>29</sup> G.D. Snooks, *Depression and Recovery in Western Australia 1928-29 - 1938-39: A Study in Cyclical and Structural Change*, (Nedlands, W.A.: University of Western Australia, 1974), 123.

<sup>30</sup> Black, *The Era of Labor Ascendancy*, 429.

<sup>31</sup> Snooks, *Development in Adversity*, 259.

<sup>32</sup> Snooks, *Depression and Recovery*, 125.

<sup>33</sup> Snooks, *Development in Adversity*, 245.

*Organised activism*

One effect of the election of the Collier government in 1933 was the growth in the power of the backbone of the party, the Australian Workers Union (AWU). While the government closed the worst of the work camps, relief-for-work remained the mainstay of the new government's management of the unemployed. The AWU was the greatest beneficiary of this because the government allowed it to recruit these workers, who were unable to retain their previous union cards whilst on the schemes. The result was an increase in AWU membership from 4406 members in 1930, to 7030 by 1935; virtually the only union to increase its membership at the time.<sup>34</sup>

The Western Australian Labor Party and trade union movement had combined many years earlier, when the trade union peak executive structure merged into the Labor Party. This meant that union demands were often subordinated to political expediency by the Labor Party.<sup>35</sup> Parliamentary candidates were selected by plebiscites of trade union and party branch members, which favoured large, conservative unions like the AWU, which could control more votes. The AWU was further strengthened when the Legislative Council rejected preference for unionists to obtain jobs; the exception being in work funded by government departments. There, employment remained conditional on union membership, and the AWU was in a strong position to recruit,<sup>36</sup> especially in the work camps. Collier also sat on the AWU executive<sup>37</sup> and so these factors led to the union's influence on Labor policy increasing significantly. At the 1932 General Council meeting of the state Labor party, the AWU had 37 of 389 available votes, or 9.5%; by 1935 their share of the vote had more than doubled to 100 out of 490 votes, or 20.4%.<sup>38</sup>

The AWU's hold over union membership in the work camps also ensured that a more radical association of unemployed relief workers could not thrive, therefore keeping militancy in check. Relief workers could pay their annual membership fees—25 shillings—in instalments of 2 shillings and sixpence,<sup>39</sup> but could not vote until fully paid up and members for two years.<sup>40</sup> This prevented the influence of radical voices from the camps, particularly at branch level, and maintained the right-wing leadership's powerful hold.

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<sup>34</sup> Ralph Pervan and Mitchell Douglas, "Changing Nature of the Australian Labor Party", In *Essays on Western Australia Politics*, edited by Ralph Pervan and Campbell Sharman (Nedlands, W.A.: University of Western Australia, 1979), 147.

<sup>35</sup> Pervan and Douglas, *The Changing Nature of the Australian Labor Party*, 133.

<sup>36</sup> Pervan and Douglas, *The Changing Nature of the Australian Labor Party*, 135.

<sup>37</sup> Justina Williams, *The First Furrow* (Willagee, W.A., Lone Hand Press, 1976), 148.

<sup>38</sup> Pervan and Douglas, *The Changing Nature of the Australian Labor Party*, 136.

<sup>39</sup> Williams, *The First Furrow*, 148.

<sup>40</sup> C.J. Fox, "The Unemployed and the Labour Movement: The West Australian Relief and Sustenance Workers Union 1933-1934 in Bosses, Workers and Unemployed." *Studies in Western Australian History V* (1982), 52.

## Introduction

The Western Australian branch of the Communist Party of Australia (CPA) was established in 1931 and provided a radical, alternative voice to Labor.<sup>41</sup> Though it had only a few hundred members in the state, the CPA struck fear into the heart of government and state forces.<sup>42</sup> Throughout the decade, it sought to influence and organise the unemployed into a militant force with which it would expose the failings of capitalism and challenge the main political parties. Given the CPA's small numbers, communists sought influence through industrial and political bodies that drew in worker activists, radicals and left-leaning intellectuals. These fraternal bodies, or "fronts" as they were often pejoratively dubbed, allowed Marxist politics to impact on several key issues in the state: unemployment, workers' rights and fascism. The CPA mobilised workers and attracted them to the party, either as members or supporters. Fraternal organisations were established, such as the Militant Minority Movement (MMM), which was established to fight for workers on the industrial floor, and to influence trade unions through their branch activities. The energy, sharpness of ideas and commitment provided by CPA members in this industrial activity gave the party credibility.

The Unemployed Workers Movement (UWM) was another communist fraternal organisation established nationally in 1930 to organise and fight for the unemployed. In the eastern states the UWM had been strongly active in many fields, from challenging government relief policies to protecting workers from eviction by direct action against bailiffs and police.<sup>43</sup> However, scrutiny and harassment of the association's members in Western Australia—the movement's leader, Jack Stevens, for example, was jailed in 1931 for vagrancy<sup>44</sup>—meant that its numbers and influence were small.

Being a CPA member demanded commitment, particularly in the late 1920s and early 1930s, which was an era defined by the Communist International's (Comintern) as the third period in the international dismantling of capitalism. The first had followed the Bolshevik revolution and revolt by workers in many countries at the end of the Great War; the second described the consolidation and re-establishment of capitalism in the 1920s. In the so-called 'Third Period', Communists predicted increased class antagonism ("class against class") in the light of spending cuts and attacks on living conditions resulting from further economic crisis.<sup>45</sup> From this perspective, the international social democratic and reformist organisations, including Labor

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<sup>41</sup> Charlie Fox, "Katharine Susannah Prichard and the Inter-War Peace Movement." In *Radical Perth, Militant Fremantle*, edited by Charlie Fox, Bobbie Oliver, Lenore Layman. Perth: Black Swan Press, 2017, 70.

<sup>42</sup> Alex Salmon, "Unemployed." Masters Thesis research and notes, Murdoch University, 1998, 134.

<sup>43</sup> Stuart Macintyre, *Reds: The Communist Party of Australia, from Origins to Illegality* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1998), 192.

<sup>44</sup> Williams, *The First Furrow*, 100.

<sup>45</sup> Macintyre, *Reds*, 185.

and the trade unions, were viewed as traitorous, likely colluding with capitalism at a time of crisis. These organisations were therefore labelled “social fascists”, a term which alienated many left-leaning workers who were members of, or loyal to, Labor. The hostile stance adopted by the CPA created bitter divisions in the labour movement and invited attacks on communists by moderate unionists. In 1935, for example, the moderate Railway Workers Union branch in Midland passed a motion that General Committee members must declare that they were not also Communist Party members.<sup>46</sup> The growth of fascism in Europe by the mid-1930s eventually led the Comintern to reconsider its strategy, and to adopt a more conciliatory position towards social democratic parties, calling on them to join with CPA activists in a united front. This strategy aimed to stop fascism from destroying working-class organisations and prevent another war.

Across Australia, special police units were established to monitor and repress organised protests and many raids were conducted on homes and offices of known communists. The strident tone of communist publications, which condemned capitalism and labour traitors and called for revolutionary change, intensified official repression.<sup>47</sup> Demands on members were intense, as the party developed ways of increasing scrutiny of members. Comrades were expelled for political failings, alleged treachery or for not paying sufficient party dues. Members were also questioned about their efforts and bravery, so adding huge internal pressures on members, on top of external ones.<sup>48</sup> Experiences of external scrutiny and harassment led to increased secrecy about meetings and, by some members, the use of pseudonyms. All of this made membership of the party a difficult experience. Not surprisingly, party numbers declined at a crucial time, a problem that forced a relaxation of its rigorous standards after 1933. Nonetheless, the party still regarded itself as a disciplined, cadre organisation, in the tradition of the Russian Bolsheviks.<sup>49</sup>

Not everyone was happy with such serious discipline. Later, in 1938, a letter to the *Worker's Star*, the party's newspaper, was critical of the paper for failing to attract workers by being “a bit sectarian”. The letter urged the paper to publish everyday stories and news, and claimed that the party risked being a “small isolated body of sincere fanatics”.<sup>50</sup> In workplaces, known communists were often victimised and blacklisted, which reduced the party's shop-floor influence. This coincided with the time when employers could exploit high levels of unemployment to drive down wages and undermine established working conditions. Less than

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<sup>46</sup> Kathy Bell, "The Midland Junction Railway Workshops: 1920-1939." In *Western Australia between the Wars 1919-1939*. edited by Jenny Gregory, (Nedlands, W.A.: University of Western Australia Press, 1990), 34.

<sup>47</sup> Macintyre, *Reds*, 207.

<sup>48</sup> Macintyre, *Reds*, 220.

<sup>49</sup> Macintyre, *Reds*, 221, 284.

<sup>50</sup> “Readers Views”. *The Workers Star*, January 27<sup>th</sup> 1938, 2.

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half the membership of the CPA was employed by the mid-1930s, and Macintyre argued that this was one reason that prevented the Militant Minority Movement becoming a *majority* movement, with a sizable shopfloor presence.<sup>51</sup>

Other CPA fraternal organisations of the 1930s actively fought against fascism in Western Australia and abroad. These organisations included the local Spanish Relief Committee, active in response to the Spanish Civil War, the Movement against War and Fascism, the Modern Women's Club, the Left Book Club, and artistic organisations such as the Worker's Arts Guild. This theatre group was prominent in 1930s Perth, producing radical, left wing drama.<sup>52</sup> Katharine Susannah Prichard, the playwright and novelist, was a high-profile member of the CPA and many of these groups. Paddy Troy, a resident of Fremantle after the late 1930s, and who was widely respected as a tireless activist and trade unionist, was another. Throughout the decade party members were harassed by police, monitored by security authorities, and vilified by conservative politicians. The CPA was proscribed by the Commonwealth government in 1940 and remained as such until 1942, when Russia joined the Allied forces in fighting Hitler.<sup>53</sup>

The 1930s was therefore a decade marked by economic crisis, political volatility, protest, repression and reaction. It was also a decade of misery for many, who endured extreme poverty and hardship. Nationally, Wendy Lowenstein used national figures from the 1933 census to show that 1 million Australian men earned less than the basic wage that year. 900,000 earned less than £2 per week, 600,000 of them earned less than £1, and over 200,000 earned nothing at all.<sup>54</sup> In Western Australia, to add to the financial pressure, hardship and degradation of unemployed families, sustenance payments were means-tested to include the value of savings and belongings. No payments were issued until two weeks of unemployment had passed, plus a week's period of registration.<sup>55</sup> This lengthy process, and the low payments that followed, led to extreme poverty and hardship. Lack highlighted the pauperising effects of sustenance, when he wrote about the experience of the unemployed in Footscray, Victoria, in the 1930s. He argued that sustenance policy helped government suppress militancy, because striking workers could not claim sustenance.<sup>56</sup> Ray Broomhill wrote of the daily experiences of the unemployed in South Australia, where he wrote that families survived on basic, monotonous diets of low quality meat, bread,

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<sup>51</sup> Macintyre, *Reds*, 257.

<sup>52</sup> Terry Craig, "Radical and Conservative Theatre in Perth in the 1930s", In *Studies in Western Australian History*, *Western Australia between the Wars 1919-1939 XI*, (1990): 106.

<sup>53</sup> Stuart Macintyre, *Militant: The Life and Times of Paddy Troy*, (Sydney: George Allen & Unwin, 1984), 61.

<sup>54</sup> Wendy Lowenstein, *Weevils in the Flour: An Oral Record of the 1930s Depression in Australia*, (South Yarra, Vic: Hyland House, 1978), 12-13.

<sup>55</sup> Bolton, *A Fine Country*, 99.

<sup>56</sup> Lack, *Footscray*, 294.

jam, margarine and tea.<sup>57</sup> The experiences there also opened up many families to exploitation by moneylenders, creating a debt cycle and poverty trap.<sup>58</sup> Without a doubt this misery was mirrored in Western Australia's working-class areas, including Fremantle.

Western Australians looked for solutions, which led many to vote for secession, but this led nowhere. Militant industrial struggle was met with government repression and this sometimes led to violent confrontation. Labor, trade unions and the Communist Party were all involved in these struggles, though Labor's lack of radical policy and leadership ensured that it often undermined such activism. In the later part of the decade, as the economy slowly recovered and the threat of war loomed again, workers and left-aligned radicals organised together to combat the rise of fascism in Europe, and its influence in Australia. This was most visibly demonstrated in the support for Spain's Republic during that country's civil war. The aim of my thesis is to examine this social, industrial and political activism as it occurred in Fremantle, with its heavily working-class population and militant reputation.

## Research Aims and Method

There is debate in the scholarly literature regarding the level of activism in Western Australian communities of the 1930s. There is also a gap in our knowledge regarding the degree to which the Fremantle community actively responded to crises in this period, including the impacts of economic depression, unemployment, workplace conflict and international events such as the Spanish Civil War and the rise of European fascism. Fremantle itself, as the state's principal port and one of its oldest established communities, has a significant history. Broad social, political and other histories of Fremantle have been offered before, as has some analysis of its trade union activities, particularly in the history of the Western Australian labour movement by Bobbie Oliver.<sup>59</sup> My research aims to add to our understandings of the history of Fremantle in the 1930s, by applying a framework with which to understand community activism. Accordingly, my research aims are to:

- analyse the demographic, social and economic picture of Fremantle in the 1930s as it is currently understood by scholars, and as it may be interpreted through census and other records;

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<sup>57</sup> Ray Broomhill, *Unemployed Workers: A Social History of the Great Depression in Adelaide*, (St. Lucia, Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 1978), 83.

<sup>58</sup> Broomhill, *Unemployed Workers*, 96.

<sup>59</sup> Oliver, *Unity is Strength*.

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- examine understandings of community activism to establish a theoretical framework with which Fremantle's activism in the 1930s might be appraised; and, thereby
- assess the nature and degree of community activism within 1930s Fremantle, and particularly the manner in which it was shaped by economic, social, political and ideological events at home and abroad.

### *Social histories and community activism*

My research draws specifically on the form of social history, to which I also apply theories of community activism. By doing so, my thesis adds to the historical and historiographical understanding of Western Australia between the wars, being the first broadly systematic and theoretical analysis of 1930s Fremantle. While a number of histories of Fremantle have previously been published, none have yet closely analysed the economic, political, social and ideological forces that shaped the community's response to crisis.

Social history implies a history of society rather than of, say, politics or diplomacy. Raphael Samuel defines social history as being of "ordinary people as against that of statecraft", which addresses everyday things rather than sensational events.<sup>60</sup> Breuille argued that social history is not a particular kind of history, but should be a feature of *every* history, with the emphasis on the 'ordinary people'.<sup>61</sup> The English Marxist historian, Eric Hobsbawm, associated social history with class structure and class politics, and argued it is the history of the poor, and 'movements of the poor,' in the context of a wider capitalist structure.<sup>62</sup> Social history in Britain, Europe and North America found its origins in the post-World War Two decades, notably with such left-leaning British scholars as E.P. Thompson, and the *Annales* school in France. Arguably, it came into its own in Australia in the 1980s, when Graeme Davison, Marian Quartly, Tom Stannage, Lenore Layman, Peter Spearritt and others used new forms of evidence, including oral histories and census records, to rethink the perspectives through which stories of communities were told. It was tied notably to advances in Indigenous, women's and labour histories at the time, including those by Anne Summers, Marilyn Lake and Stuart Macintyre. Some of these works will be discussed later in reviewing the literature on 1930s activism and militancy, as it relates to Australia.

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<sup>60</sup> Raphael Samuel, "What Is Social History?" *History Today* 35, no. 3 (1985).  
<http://www.historytoday.com/raphael-samuel/>

<sup>61</sup> John Breuille, "What Is Social History?" *History Today* 35, no. 3 (1985).  
<http://www.historytoday.com/breuille-john/>

<sup>62</sup> E. J. Hobsbawm, "From Social History to the History of Society", *Daedalus* 100, no. 1 (1971): 20.  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/20023989>

There are many published histories of Fremantle, but few which address the experiences of the 1930s. Two are the valuable recollections of former pupils of Fremantle Primary School, collated by Karen Lang and Jan Neuman, and the biography of Paddy Troy by Stuart Macintyre, which covers Troy's time in Fremantle in the late 1930s. However, there is nothing published about protest and agitation in the port city in this period. Most of the published history of Fremantle addresses colonial development, convictism, heritage, culture and the impact of war.

Charlie Fox's history of unemployed politics in Victoria is an influential work here, as it analysed the growth and decline of unemployed activism in the 1930s. Similarly, Stuart Macintyre's history of the Australian Communist Party provides a political history that is an influential source for my thesis, providing national and international context to explain local militant activism. These, and other local and national works will be discussed in the literature review later, to provide the academic foundation for my own approach to the study of the social history of activism in Fremantle.

### *Community Activism Theories*

'Community activism' is the conscious activity within a community that is normally provoked by social, economic, political and/or environmental factors. Activist movements are often driven by personal experiences of activists and those around them, which may include loss, unemployment, hardship, discrimination, humiliation and inequity. Community activism can be militant and politically conscious, driven by indignation and desire for change. As David Meyer stated: "activists do not choose goals, strategies, and tactics in a vacuum".<sup>63</sup>

Activism may also involve a broader idea of community, composed of many different sub-communities, of class, gender, ethnicity, religion, employment, unionism, clubs and association, suburbs and neighbourhood in campaigns for social reform and liberal freedoms. Jean Spence and Carol Stephenson argued that community groups can be unified by a broader sense of purpose that may be provoked by loyalty, sympathy, generosity and solidarity in times of crisis.<sup>64</sup> However, according to their definition, communities can be both conservative—seeking to maintain existing conditions— and progressive—seeking change. 'Communities of the unemployed', as argued by

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<sup>63</sup> David Meyer, "Protest and Political Opportunities", *Annual Review of Sociology* 30(2004) (2004):127. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/29737688>

<sup>64</sup> Jean Spence and Carol Stephenson, "'Side by Side with Our Men?' Women's Activism, Community, and Gender in the 1984-1985 British Miners' Strike." *International Labor and Working-Class History*, no. 75 (2009): 81. <http://www.jstor.org.ipacez.nd.edu.au/stable/27673142>



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Charlie Fox, may imply positive or negative meaning, as their actions can be, variously, unifying and divisive.<sup>65</sup>

Lucy Taksa has argued that the concept of community is dynamic rather than fixed.<sup>66</sup> In her view, communities are diverse and fluid and individuals can identify with more than one sub-community. Community is therefore ephemeral, contingent and fragmentary, rather than fixed and definite, with the potential for conflict as well as harmony. Taksa also argued that community needs to be analysed in relation to several other factors, the most important of which is social class, and in the context of labour history, this becomes the working-class. She showed that labour historians have delineated three ways in which both community and social class relate to each other: where community and class are in opposition; where community and class come together; and where the working-class *is* the community. But Taksa argued that these relationships, too, are fluid, contingent and historical, where pressures to integrate come with pressures to divide and exclude, where face-to-face communities relate in complex ways to much larger communities.<sup>67</sup>

Analysing activism in Fremantle in the 1930s and engaging the primary evidence with the academic literature requires a theoretical framework. It is not enough to simply describe the activism that happened, but how it arose and gained momentum, and whether it was repressed, undermined or succeeded. The factors that promoted or inhibited activism will be examined, in order to assess the *degree* of community activism in Fremantle in relation to economic and social conditions and political events and ideology.

### *Political Process Theory*

A search of the literature of sociological, historical and community psychology methods, revealed few existing methodologies that suited a retrospective interpretation of Fremantle's experience of the inter-war years. Political Process Theory (PPT) however, appeared to provide a solution.

PPT was developed in the 1970s and 1980s as a model to explain the development of social movements, which were themselves described by Sidney Tarrow as a collective challenge by people who seek to resolve a common problem.<sup>68</sup> PPT describes how social movements have a rational basis for existence and that individuals make conscious choices to become involved. A

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<sup>65</sup> Charlie Fox, *Fighting Back: The Politics of the Unemployed in Victoria in the Great Depression*, (Carlton South, Victoria: Melbourne University Press, 2000), 8.

<sup>66</sup> Lucy Taksa, "Like a bicycle, forever teetering between individualism and collectivism: Considering community in relation to labour history." *Labour History*, no. 78 (2000): 7-32.

<sup>67</sup> Taksa, *Like a bicycle*, 17-19.

<sup>68</sup> Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements, Collective Action and Politics*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 3.

number of dynamic elements must be present to grow a social movement—and, conversely, be absent to stifle it. The theory of political process first took shape in the work of Charles Tilly, who determined that social movements were dependent on three factors.<sup>69</sup> Neal Caren summarised them as interests (being what the participants may gain in terms of social reform, from involvement in an active movement); organisation (being the level of unified identity within an existing organisation, such as a church or trade union that helped bind an early movement's membership); and opportunity (including the internal and external factors that promote or suppress the power of a group, and support or inhibit change).<sup>70</sup>

Doug McAdam further developed Tilly's ideas in the 1980s. His research of PPT was based on an examination of the African-American civil rights movement in the twentieth century.<sup>71</sup> McAdam developed concepts that provided an explanation of the growth and decline of this movement from the 1930s to the 1970s. Firstly, McAdam identified the importance of political opportunities that created a movement and challenged existing norms. In the case of the civil rights movement, increasingly confident challenges were made to social segregation of—and discrimination against—the African-American community. The rise of the civil rights movement was due to a number of factors, including the geographic shift by black workers to the industrial centres of North America during the twentieth century. As a result, these workers were increasingly removed from the bigotry, poverty and exploitation experienced by many in the southern states. The repressive structures of county policing in these southern states and the activism of clandestine organisations such as the Ku Klux Klan became impossible to tolerate. Such racism was increasingly embarrassing to the United States government during the Cold War, when America claimed the moral high ground in relation to personal freedom. McAdam also cited the reduction in lynching that took place as another factor that emboldened the black community in its demands for social justice and equality:<sup>72</sup> this community was no longer intimidated into silence and inaction. McAdam's research therefore supported Tarrow's argument that social movements form and respond to political opportunity, particularly when the vulnerability of authorities is evident.<sup>73</sup>

Secondly, McAdam showed that the presence of indigenous organisations—those which already existed in the community—often united the community and facilitated cohesion around

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<sup>69</sup> Charles Tilly, *From Mobilization to Revolution*, (Reading, MA, USA: Addison-Wesley, 1978).

<sup>70</sup> Neal Caren, "Political Process Theory", In *Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology*, edited by George Ritzer, 1-5: Blackwell Reference Online, 2007, 2.

<sup>71</sup> D. McAdam, *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930-1970*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 1982).

<sup>72</sup> McAdam, *Political Process*, 97.

<sup>73</sup> Tarrow, *Power*, 18.

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common experiences and beliefs.<sup>74</sup> Such organisations, later called mobilising structures, provided a meeting place to share ideas and a local leadership to articulate the community's experience, aspirations and values. They might include organisations such as schools, churches, trade unions and clubs, and are the foundation for further organised activity and the formation of new organisations to advance a movement.<sup>75</sup>

McAdam, finally, identified a process of cognitive liberation, which arises from a realisation by an aggrieved group that current political circumstances lack legitimacy and require change. McAdam formulated this concept to explain a social movement's articulation of its ideas and goals, and the realisation that political and social change needed to occur to create progress. The concept later became known as framing.<sup>76</sup>

The three PPT concepts developed by McAdam were later developed further by Tarrow, who described the consensus that occurs in an emerging movement, when grievances, demands, and remedies are agreed, and unifying symbols are adopted.<sup>77</sup> He identified protest cycles as a means to explain how community activists move beyond ideas to action.<sup>78</sup> Mobilisation, he argued, promotes the goals of an emerging movement, generates solidarity, and attracts new supporters. Activity might include public meetings, leafleting, letters to newspaper, door knocking, and informal neighbourhood discussion. Once mobilised, a movement might gain momentum and publicity—but may also experience repression and opposition.

Having gained momentum, Tilly called activities that pressed for change 'contentious repertoires'.<sup>79</sup> In its final period of agitation, a movement is likely to transition to high profile activism, which might include industrial strikes, demonstrations, marches, boycotts, community defence and self-defence. Such activities are usually well recognised by society and are designed to enforce the claims of the movement. They are the culmination of collective work to realise demands and create social or political change.<sup>80</sup>

PPT remains an important and evolving sociological theory to explain social movements, including their growth and decline. I have summarised its five key principles in the following table.

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<sup>74</sup> McAdam, *Political Process*, 31.

<sup>75</sup> Caren, *Political Process Theory*, 2.

<sup>76</sup> Caren, *Political Process Theory*, 2.

<sup>77</sup> Tarrow, *Power*, 122-123.

<sup>78</sup> Tarrow, *Power*, 153.

<sup>79</sup> Tilly, *From Mobilization*, 152.

<sup>80</sup> Tilly, *From Mobilization*, 152.

**Table 1: Stages of community activism, as identified within Political Process Theory.**

Stage	Features
1. Political Opportunity	Arises when genuine grievance develops and the existing order is questioned or weakened. Also explains checks and repressive measures that restrict opportunity and growth.
2. Mobilising Structures	Existing community structures and groups provide organisation, leadership and social connection, leading to new organisations.
3. Framing	Problems and solutions are formed and articulated into demands.
4. Protest Cycle	Organised activity generates publicity, solidarity and momentum, and attracts new supporters.
5. Contentious Repertoires	Action and agitation forces claims. Action includes strikes, demonstrations, marches, community defence. These actions may increase repressive measures and opposition that reduces further political opportunity and creates decline in the movement.

#### *Other factors that promote or inhibit activism*

Other concepts may also help explain the circumstances that promote or inhibit activism. These include psychological issues arising from past experiences (such as war), confidence and resilience.

Ryan J. Kirkby discussed features of community activism in reviewing the initiatives of America's Black Panther Party (BPP) in the 1960s and 1970s, campaigning for African-American civil rights and social justice.<sup>81</sup> The BPP established radical "Survival Programs" in poor black neighbourhoods, providing cooked breakfasts for children, education classes for adults, health clinics, legal advice services and community advocacy. These programs raised black and working-class consciousness, and promoted a more confident and resilient community.<sup>82</sup>

Pilar Hernandez discussed the concept of collective resilience: coping processes that help rebuild a community following experiences of trauma.<sup>83</sup> Writing about South American

<sup>81</sup> Ryan J. Kirkby, "'The Revolution Will Not Be Televised': Community Activism and the Black Panther Party, 1966–1971", *Canadian Review of American Studies* 41, no. 1 (2011): 25-62. DOI:10.3138/cras.41.1.25.

<sup>82</sup> Kirkby, *The Revolution*, 32.

<sup>83</sup> Pilar Hernandez, "Resilience in Families and Communities: Latin American Contributions from the Psychology of Liberation", *The Family Journal* 10, no. 3 (2002/07/01 2002): 334. DOI:10.1177/1068070201000301.

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communities that have experienced military dictatorship, civil war and/or unrest, Hernandez proposed that community resilience helps sustain social relationships and maintain a sense of belonging and identity. There are parallels with those studies she made and that of Australian communities after the Great War, as most communities experienced loss associated with the war; Fremantle certainly did. Community resilience, publicly demonstrated in the building of war memorials across Australia in the 1920s, attempted to unite grieving communities and forge community solidarity.

Linda Viney's research on the mental health effects of unemployment in Britain in the 1980s is also helpful to this study. She shows that unemployed individuals exhibited more anxiety, depression, anger, shame and alienation than those who were in employment.<sup>84</sup> These presentations were higher still for unemployed individuals with children. Viney's conclusions are no surprise given the demoralising effects of unemployment and poverty, and were found by Fox to be evident also amongst Australia's unemployed of the 1930s.<sup>85</sup>

### *Chapter Structure*

Later chapters draw on rich primary and secondary sources that inform our understanding of Fremantle in the 1930s. We can gain much by a close analysis of the census data that was collected in 1933, and a 'snapshot' of the community as it was revealed by the census is therefore provided in Chapter Two. At that time, Fremantle was considered to include the local government regions Fremantle, East Fremantle, North Fremantle and the Fremantle Roads Board. The census data allows insight into Fremantle's economic and social conditions by providing figures on employment and unemployment, employment types, wages, education levels and ethnicity. Archival research informs Chapters Three and Four, which look at key examples of activism in 1930s Fremantle.

Chapter Three considers issues such as unemployment, survival, unemployment relief, and industrial struggle, analysing the politics of the unemployed, as well as the role of the Fremantle Council, Labor Party, Trades Hall, trade unions, and the Communist Party and its fraternal organisations. This is an opportunity, therefore, to consider key political, social and economic issues as they were shaped by domestic circumstances. Chapter Four, on the other hand, considers how the community responded to critical international issues, including the rise

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<sup>84</sup> Linda L. Viney, " 'They Call You a Dole Bludger': Some Experiences of Unemployment." *Journal of Community Psychology* 13, no. 1 (1985): 31. DOI:10.1002/1520-6629(198501)13:1<31::AID-JCOP2290130105>3.0.CO;2-0

<sup>85</sup> Charlie Fox, *Fighting Back*. 98.

of fascism and anti-Fascism. As a result, it will concentrate on ideology within migrant Italian and Yugoslav communities in Fremantle, as well as activism in relation to the Spanish Civil War. These chapters will be followed by a conclusion that will bring together the findings of this thesis and the extent to which political process theory was useful. It will also consider what Fremantle's activism says about Fremantle in the decade. It will be argued that Fremantle had a well-organised network of activists in the labour movement that was able to defeat and overcome many of the repressive measures introduced in the 1930s by the state government to prevent militancy. This activism included industrial disputes as well as political and ideological campaigns to fight the rise of fascism.

# Chapter One

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### WESTERN AUSTRALIA IN THE 1930S

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In addition to the Political Process Theory discussed, this thesis is informed by three genres of literature: histories of Fremantle, especially regarding the 1930s; the historiography of Western Australia's Great Depression, notably the debate arising from the works of Bolton and Crowley; and literature relating to fascism and anti-fascism in Australia.

#### *The histories of Fremantle*

Perhaps these people think that not enough is being done for them. Whether or not that is so, they only aggravate their position by taking part in stupid demonstrations.

Fremantle Magistrate, 1932.<sup>1</sup>

There have been many histories written on Fremantle, but none deal systematically with the Great Depression. These histories include *Voices from the West End*, a collection of stories about people and events in the city, edited by Paul Longley Arthur and Geoffrey Bolton. This work considers the 1919 waterfront strike and riot, and the development of the Italian fishing industry, though does not address the Depression itself.<sup>2</sup> J.K. Hitchcock's classic *History of Fremantle* covers its first hundred years after British settlement to 1929, and therefore stops short of the period under investigation.<sup>3</sup> *Fremantle Impressions* by Ron Davidson provides a meandering tour of Fremantle's origins, history, culture and heritage. It discusses the colourful characters, events and stories that make Fremantle a unique city, though barely covers material from the 1930s.<sup>4</sup> Nor does Jack Lee's history of East Fremantle mention much of the Depression era.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, whilst

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<sup>1</sup> "Will Hunger Strike: Window-Smashers Threat. Demonstrators Jailed". *The Daily News*, January 16<sup>th</sup>, 1932, 10.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Longley Arthur and Geoffrey Bolton (Editors), *Voices from the West End: Stories, People and Events That Shaped Fremantle*, (Western Australia 6106: Western Australia Museum, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> J.K. Hitchcock, *The History of Fremantle: The Front Gate of Australia, 1829-1929*, (Fremantle, Fremantle City Council, 1929).

<sup>4</sup> Ron Davidson, *Fremantle Impressions*, (North Fremantle 6159: Fremantle Arts Centre, 2007).

<sup>5</sup> Jack Lee, *This Is East Fremantle: The Story of a Town and Its People*, (West Perth: Publication Printers Pty Ltd, 1979).

Michael Berson's history of nearby Cockburn discusses the role of migrants who pioneered settlement in the area, particularly from the 1920s, there is little mention of the hardship or activism of the 1930s.<sup>6</sup> Generally then, these histories cover the issues of settlement, convictism, migration, culture and heritage, but leave gaps regarding local 1930s politics and protest.

Two more recent publications, one co-edited by Deborah Gare and Shane Burke, and the other co-written by Deborah Gare and Madison Lloyd-Jones, cover issues relating to industrial and political disputes in Fremantle in the 1930s. In the first of these, *Fremantle: Empire, Faith and Conflict since 1829*, Bobbie Oliver analyses the waterfront unions and their development, including the establishment of the Lumpers Union in 1889 and, later in 1911, the Coastal, Dock, Rivers and Harbour Workers Union.<sup>7</sup> Oliver notes that the late formation of trade unions in Western Australia meant that unskilled workers unions developed at the same time as craft and skilled workers unions. The Lumpers' casual employment, in often dangerous and filthy conditions, created conditions for militancy. She argued that the long working hours and low pay drove these workers to fight for improved conditions, and they had some success in doing so.

Elsewhere, Oliver described the most significant example of post-World War One class tension in Western Australia: the Lumpers Union strike and riot of 1919 in Fremantle. This strike, caused by the introduction of a scab union to weaken the Lumpers' Union, led to violent clashes between striking dockers and sympathetic returned soldiers, and armed police and strike-breakers. The violence caused the death of one worker, Tom Edwards,<sup>8</sup> and helped foster an anti-socialist political orthodoxy in Western Australian government, which lingered into the 1930s. Oliver showed that this view shaped government strategies and policies to manage the working class during the depression, but the dispute also led to sharpened class-consciousness amongst many trade unionists, particularly amongst waterfront workers. State and federal legislation, such as the Commonwealth *Transport Workers Act* of 1928, tried to curtail waterfront activism by forcing dock-workers to become registered. Called the 'dog-collar act' by the Lumpers, it allowed the exclusion of militant workers at the daily pick-up points by not allowing them licenses.<sup>9</sup> The Lumpers had always been politically active in support of issues beyond their own pay and

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<sup>6</sup> Michael Berson, *Cockburn: The Making of a Community*, (Town of Cockburn: Town of Cockburn, 1978).

<sup>7</sup> Bobbie Oliver, "Conflict on the Waterfront: Fremantle Dock Workers and 'New Unionism': 1889 to 1945", In *Fremantle: Empire, Faith and Conflict*, edited by Shane Burke and Deborah Gare, (Crawley, WA, 6009: Centre for Western Australian History, 2016), 159-172.

<sup>8</sup> Bobbie Oliver, "Fremantle's 'Bloody Sunday': 'The Finest Exhibition of Solidarity in Western Australian history'", In *Radical Perth, Militant Fremantle*, edited by Bobbie Oliver, Charlie Fox, Lenore Layman, (Perth: Black Swan Press, 2017), 35-42.

<sup>9</sup> Oliver, *Conflict on the Waterfront*, 171.



conditions and Oliver suggests they were therefore a dynamic force in Fremantle's labour movement, including in the 1930s.

In her methodical study of a key element of Fremantle's Great Depression, Michelle McKeough addressed the response of the Council to the economic crisis in her recent doctoral thesis.<sup>10</sup> McKeough's study revealed the council's attempts to soften the blow of the Depression on the local community by initiating charitable welfare for single men and women, and work projects to soak up unemployment that provided limited work to local men. McKeough outlined the hard work of the council, led by Frank Gibson, Fremantle's Mayor, who worked tirelessly on committees and with local community groups to alleviate the worst effects of the economic slump. The council had limited resources to ease the problems, and as the Depression worsened, so did its income from declining rates payments, which led to tensions with local ratepayers. Overall though, McKeough argued that there was a genuine civic response to the crisis by the council.

*When War Came to Fremantle: 1899 to 1945*, co-written by Deborah Gare and Madison Lloyd-Jones, addressed the impact of war on Fremantle, and the city's contribution to Australia's wars. Gare and Lloyd-Jones addressed the increasing awareness and concern by the local community to European political tensions in the 1930s, and the local engagement and public activity related to this; especially the Spanish Civil war. They record that much of this activism was performed on the dockside, as civil war volunteers departed for Spain or were welcomed home by enthusiastic locals, who became more supportive of anti-fascism and communism as world war loomed.<sup>11</sup>

### *The Bolton/Crowley narrative and its critics*

Geoffrey Bolton's history of the Depression in Western Australia, covering the period between 1929 and 1933, argued that the remoteness, limited urbanisation and industrialisation of the Western Australian economy, ensured the state was relatively immune to the organised militancy seen in the east. Bolton argued that whilst the response to the Depression by the Mitchell government was inadequate, Western Australians were not inclined to protest or agitate. He argued that: "It was impossible to treat Mitchell as a target for sustained hostility. He was too well known, too decent, too obviously sharing the concern and bewilderment of his people."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Michelle McKeough, "A Council and Its Crises: Challenge and Response in Fremantle's Community During Three Times of Crisis - the Bubonic Plague, the Great War, the Depression Era." Phd, Murdoch University, 2016.

<sup>11</sup> Deborah Gare and Madison Lloyd-Jones *When War Came to Fremantle*, (Fremantle: Fremantle Press, 2014), 68.

<sup>12</sup> Bolton, *A Fine Country*, 120.

Bolton argued that despite the high levels of unemployment and insecure employment (Australia had the second highest unemployment rates during the Great Depression, second only to Germany),<sup>13</sup> which peaked in Western Australia at 30.3% in mid-1932,<sup>14</sup> there was relative calm in the community and limited dissent. Western Australia was *different*, he argued, and consensus politics, which had long reigned in Western Australia, mostly united Western Australians in tough times. The compact society was able to absorb and soften conflict and when there was local protest it was often displayed by outsiders from places with a history of militant struggle.<sup>15</sup> According to Bolton, these—mostly young—men, not only *were* outsiders but also *acted* like outsiders.<sup>16</sup> Western Australians directed what anger they had towards the eastern states and, hence, achieved the secession referendum result. Frank Crowley had earlier adopted a similar position in his work, *Australia's Western Third*. He too argued Western Australians were different in their outlook and their collective and consensual mindset worked to limit activism, protest and dissent.<sup>17</sup>

Jenny Gregory challenged the narrative of Bolton and Crowley, arguing that Bolton over-emphasised consensus, and focussed too much on rural issues, so minimising class tensions in Perth narrative of consensus politics in the 1930s.<sup>18</sup> She criticised Crowley, too, for failing to question the political rationale behind the setting up of work camps and relief projects in the countryside. She also questioned his emphasis on macroeconomics, which underplayed the individual experiences of deprivation. Their view, she argued, was a sentimental one, of a bygone age in which Bolton wrote of the possibility of meeting and chatting with Sir James Mitchell on his morning stroll. This cosy view of Western Australia, she wrote, overlooked the bitter divisiveness created by world politics and economics.

Charlie Fox also rejected the Bolton view of consensus and lack of militancy in Western Australia during the depression, and argued that Bolton's analysis of the period was limited, as it only covered the years up to 1933. Although conditions generally eased, relatively speaking, after that time, the lived experience remained much the same for most workers up until the start of

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<sup>13</sup> Lowenstein, *Weevils in the Flour*, 16.

<sup>14</sup> Geoffrey Bolton, "Unemployment and Politics in Western Australia", In *The Great Depression in Australia*, edited by Robert Cooksey. Labour History Number 17, Canberra: Australian Society for the study of Labour History, 1970, 80.

<sup>15</sup> Bolton, *A Fine Country*, 268.

<sup>16</sup> Bolton, *A Fine Country*, 268.

<sup>17</sup> FK. Crowley, *Australia's Western Third: A History of Western Australia from First Settlement to Modern Times* (Nedlands. W.A.: University of Western Australia Press, 1960).

<sup>18</sup> Jenny Gregory, "Western Australia between the Wars: The Consensus Myth", In *Western Australia between the Wars: 1919-1939: Studies in Western Australian History*, edited by Jenny Gregory, (Nedlands, WA 6009: Centre for Western Australian History, 1990), 1-16.

the Second World War. These ongoing conditions provoked several high-profile examples of activism in Western Australia, including some evident in the years covered by Bolton's work. These episodes revealed sharp class politics at play, and the heavy-handed use of state forces to quell protest. There may have been relative consensus between Labor and the Nationals about how to deal with the economic crisis, but amongst the unemployed and workers, there was no sense that this was being done fairly. Salmon addressed much of this activism and protest in his research on the unemployed in 1930s Western Australia.<sup>19</sup> He showed that the unemployed were driven to organise and protest by necessity, against the totally inadequate provision by state governments, both National/Country and Labor.<sup>20</sup>

Fox also examined the activity of the unemployed to organise themselves in the formation of the Relief and Sustenance Workers Union (RSWU) in Western Australia in 1933.<sup>21</sup> This organisation was actively supported by the local Australian Labor Party Fremantle District Council and given accommodation in the Council's Trades Hall in Collie Street.<sup>22</sup> Fox described the tensions created by this union amongst the labour movement and the undermining tactics of the Australian Workers Union and Labor leadership, who wanted to control the unemployed and their activism.

Sally Kennedy also critiqued the Bolton thesis. She found that women workers were particularly vulnerable to exploitation during the Depression. The first minimum wage set by the Western Australian Court of Arbitration in 1926 set the minimum wage for women at 56% of the male rate. Despite this large disparity in pay, the 1933 census indicated that 21.8% of breadwinners in Western Australia were women.<sup>23</sup> Between 1930 and 1934 wages contracted for both men and women, but the rate of contraction was greater for women. During this period, arbitration awards were undercut and, in small shops and factories where many women worked, they often worked longer hours for reduced pay. Nor was the Shop Workers Union able to stop such award abuses.<sup>24</sup> As one woman commented on her work experience, "It was always called part-time during the Depression, but it meant working a bloody sight longer, for less".<sup>25</sup> Kennedy also argued, contra Bolton, that, despite low pay and hard work, women in paid work absorbed the anger of many who could not comprehend the reality of the economic crisis, so distracting

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<sup>19</sup> Salmon, *Unemployed*. Thesis research and notes.

<sup>20</sup> Salmon, *Unemployed*, Thesis research and notes, 162.

<sup>21</sup> C.J. Fox, *The Unemployed and the Labour Movement*, 49.

<sup>22</sup> Oliver, *Unity is Strength*, 136.

<sup>23</sup> Sally Kennedy, *Segregation for Integration: Women and Work in Factories and Shops in Western Australia During the Great Depression*, in "Bosses, Workers and Unemployed", *Studies in Western Australian History* V, Edited by Lenore Layman, Nedlands: University of Western Australia, 1982, 42.

<sup>24</sup> Kennedy, *Segregation*, 45.

<sup>25</sup> Kennedy, *Segregation*, 45.

Western Australians from looking towards the economic system as the cause of their economic woes.<sup>26</sup>

Rita Farrell wrote about one significant community organisation, *The Ugly Men's Association*. The Ugliers, as they became known, were created to support the poor, as poverty endured after the Great War and then worsened. The original aim of the organisation, founded by tradesmen in 1917, was to raise funds to support families affected by the Great War.<sup>27</sup> The money raised allowed them to renovate or build homes for families affected by war-loss, disablement or unemployment, and generally support families in need. Money was raised through the organisation of fun fairs and other public entertainment, including a standing amusement park in central Fremantle on what is now Pioneer Park. This organisation continued to support the poor in the community beyond the 1920s and Farrell noted they retained a public profile in Fremantle and Perth until at least the mid-1930s.<sup>28</sup> They successfully helped raise morale through entertainment and solidarity, providing a social platform for the community, and materially assisting individuals and families. This was an organisation well aware of working-class poverty without it being politically partisan. Farrell showed that it provided essential community charity for a longer period than it originally expected; in the absence of adequate unemployment assistance and work, it alleviated extreme poverty for many. The Ugliers contributed to what Bolton regarded as the Western Australia consensus—pulling together, helping out in times of trouble—but this was also an organisation well aware of its working-class roots and the casualties of economic failure. It is likely therefore, that many members, all working tradesmen, would have sympathised with the local struggles for work and fair pay.

#### *Fascism and anti-fascism*

In a major publication, Gianfranco Cresciani argued that political activism was evident in Australia within Italian migrant populations.<sup>29</sup> The Italian community in Australia became increasingly politicised in response to economic hardship, their experience of racial discrimination, Mussolini's power in Italy and the transmission of Italian fascist ideology to Australia. The Italian community was divided in its support of, or opposition to, Mussolini.<sup>30</sup> He further argued that when this support was evident it was often propelled by the Italian consular propaganda machine and local

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<sup>26</sup> Kennedy, *Segregation*, 45.

<sup>27</sup> Rita Farrell, "A History of the Ugly Men's Voluntary Workers Association of W.A. Inc." Hons Thesis, Murdoch University, 1993.

<sup>28</sup> Farrell, *The Ugly Men's Association*, 87.

<sup>29</sup> Gianfranco Cresciani, *Fascism, Anti-Fascism and Italians in Australia, 1922-1945*, (Canberra: Australian National University Press), 1980.

<sup>30</sup> Cresciani, *Fascism*, 75.

Italian publications such as *Il Giornale Italiano*.<sup>31</sup> Richard and Michal Bosworth also wrote of the influence of propaganda on the Italian community in describing another provocative and rabidly fascist paper, *La Stampa Italiano*.<sup>32</sup> This was produced in Perth for a short period between 1931 and 1932, before the paper had its license cancelled and the editor, Luigi Mistrorigo, deported back to Italy in 1932.<sup>33</sup> Bizarrely, a Commonwealth Investigation Branch report concluded that Mistrorigo was an *agent provocateur*, trying to rehabilitate himself in the eyes of the local Vice Consul. He had previously fled Rome, having been identified as a communist.

Bosworth and Bosworth suggested that Italian experiences of racism within a 'white Australia' culture fuelled Italian nationalism and pro-Mussolini support. Andrew Moore argued that this newspaper closure and deportation signalled intolerance by Australian authorities towards rabid, fascist views.<sup>34</sup> Cresciani also showed that the Commonwealth government was also nervous, more so even about anti-fascist publications, banning *Il Risveglio*, an earlier anti-fascist Italian paper published in Sydney in the late 1920s.<sup>35</sup>

From 1936, the civil war in Spain created a focus for fascist and anti-fascist politics globally and in Australia too. Bronte Gould calculated that 66 Australians participated directly in the Spanish Civil War, most of whom supported Spain's Republican government.<sup>36</sup> The attention Spain attracted because of these ideological conflicts and the fear of another European war, created a wave of global political activism. Workers, peace activists and left-wing intellectuals joined the Spanish International Brigade to support the republican side. The neutrality of the Australian government, a position supported by the opposition ALP and the agreement to follow Britain's non-intervention strategy, sparked defiant activism amongst trade unionists, communists, socialists and liberal intellectuals. Gould showed that this led to the creation of the Spanish Relief Committee in 1936 in Sydney to raise funds to support republican Spain and those affected by the war.<sup>37</sup> The conflict in Spain resonated in Western Australia. Highlighting the division within the Italian community on fascism, one letter by an anonymous Italian migrant to the *West Australian* stated, 'the war is against fascism for democracy'.<sup>38</sup> In his published letters,

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<sup>31</sup> Cresciani, *Fascism*, 75.

<sup>32</sup> Richard Bosworth and Michal Bosworth, *Fremantle's Italy*, (Roma: Gruppo Editoriale Internazionale, 1993), 84.

<sup>33</sup> Bosworth and Bosworth, *Fremantle's Italy*.

<sup>34</sup> Andrew Moore, *The Right Road: A history of Right-Wing politics in Australia*, (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1995), 35.

<sup>35</sup> Cresciani, *Fascism*, 101.

<sup>36</sup> Bronte Gould, "Australian Participation in the Spanish Civil War", (*Flinders Journal of History and Politics*, 28, 2012), 98.

<sup>37</sup> Gould, *Australian Participation*, 101.

<sup>38</sup> Gould, *Australian Participation*, 101.

Lloyd Edmonds, who also fought in Spain, expressed international idealism: “The excitement, the feeling that you are doing something important....I really think this is the best thing I’ve done”.<sup>39</sup>

### *Summary*

The academic literature on 1930s Western Australia and Fremantle therefore reveals two main themes: the first is that there are significant gaps in our knowledge of activism in 1930s Fremantle. Most of the work written on the city’s history relates to colonial settlement, convictism, heritage, culture and the effects of war. It is really only McKeough’s research, which covers the same period, location and topic as my thesis. Although it has a different focus (addressing specifically the Council’s response to the Depression) it is a valuable addition to the knowledge of the history of Fremantle.

The second theme relates to Bolton and Crowley’s argument that the consensual nature of Western Australia meant that, during the 1930s, the state did not display the same degree of social conflict and tension seen on the east coast or in Europe. This is at odds with the views of later historians who point to evidence of class conflict, militancy and state suppression. The argument I will build in the coming chapters supports the criticism of Bolton and Crowley’s views and suggests that whilst there were displays of consensus politics in Fremantle—including the Ugly Men’s Association work, Fremantle Council’s efforts to alleviate poverty, and evidence of local charity work—there was also continued class-conscious activism that campaigned on local, state, national and international issues. First though, I will examine the data on the Fremantle area taken from the 1933 Census, to provide a snapshot of the Fremantle community at the time.

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<sup>39</sup> Amirah Inglis, *Lloyd Edmonds: Letters from Spain*, (Sydney: George Allen and Unwin, 1985), 120.

## Chapter Two

### SNAPSHOT

# FREMANTLE AND THE CENSUS DATA OF 1933

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In 1933, under Joseph Lyons' government, the Australian Bureau of Statistics conducted the first national census since 1922. The timing of the census, coming as it did in the middle of the Great Depression, provides a snapshot of Australia at a time of economic crisis. It therefore provides valuable information about Fremantle in relation to demographics, employment, unemployment, income, and the ethnic and religious make-up of the local area. Aboriginal people were not included in the census, being precluded by the Commonwealth constitution until 1967.

The census provides insight to the hardships endured by many in the face of failing government policies during the Depression. This short chapter will inform discussions of community and activism in Chapters Three and Four, by providing demographic and economic context. The experiences of four individual districts in Fremantle were reported within the census: Fremantle, East Fremantle, North Fremantle and the Fremantle Roads District, which included what were then emerging outer suburbs such as Hamilton Hill, Spearwood and Palmyra.<sup>1</sup>

#### *The Population of Fremantle*

The non-indigenous population of Western Australia in 1933, as recorded by the census, was 438,852 people. Of these, 233,937 were men and 204,915 were women. The population of the four Fremantle districts amounted to 27,445, or around 6.25% of the state's population; it was divided evenly between men and women.<sup>2</sup> Of the men, 5,322 were recorded as married, compared to 5,446 women. Not surprisingly, given the recent experience of the Great War, 1153 women in the area reported as being widowed, compared to 440 men. Only 47 women and 46 men were recorded as being divorced.<sup>3</sup>

Additionally, the census recorded that 4,026 boys and 4,146 girls under the age of 16 years lived in these areas. Of these, 223 boys had one parent deceased and eight were orphaned. Of the girls, the comparative figures were 299 and seven.<sup>4</sup> Reflecting the limited access to tertiary

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<sup>1</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, National Census 1933  
[www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/obs@nsf/Productsbycatalogue/9B036PAC21D4CA2578C00194FAS?OpenDocument](http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/obs@nsf/Productsbycatalogue/9B036PAC21D4CA2578C00194FAS?OpenDocument)

<sup>2</sup> ABS, 430-441.

<sup>3</sup> ABS, 442-447.

<sup>4</sup> ABS, 454-456.

education at the time and the predominantly working-class population of Fremantle, only eight males and six females within the Fremantle district are recorded as having attended university, out of a total population of 16,998. In all four districts, 1,151 men and 3 women had served in the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) during the Great War.

Not surprisingly, the overwhelming majority of the population recorded themselves as Christian, with Church of England and Roman Catholicism being the dominant churches.<sup>5</sup> Yet there were also small numbers of non-Christian religions recorded. In the city of Fremantle, where the state's original synagogue stood on South Terrace, 22 people were recorded as being 'Hebrew'.

Most residents were born in Australia, New Zealand, Britain or Ireland; yet there were also 326 Italians, 82 Yugoslavs, 62 from Norway and Sweden (likely visiting seamen in port as there was no established Scandinavian community), 40 Germans and 16 from China (all of whom were male) living in Fremantle's districts. In most of the minority ethnic groups, men significantly outnumbered women, though the Italian and Yugoslav populations included a significant presence of women, suggesting the consolidation of those migrant communities. Such families often lived in neighbourhood clusters.<sup>6</sup> The Italian community, for example, settled in several streets off Fremantle's South Terrace; the small number of Chinese lived and operated market gardens in North Fremantle.<sup>7</sup>

### *Employment in Fremantle*

The most striking figures in Fremantle's census relate to the high numbers of unemployed. We know from other research that unemployment figures in Western Australia had peaked in the second quarter of 1932, with an unemployment rate of 30.3%.<sup>8</sup> By 1933, the figure for unemployed trade unionists in Western Australia was slowly dropping, down from an average of 29.5% in 1932 to 24.8% in 1933.<sup>9</sup> The overwhelming reason stated in the census for being unemployed was 'scarcity of work'.<sup>10</sup> In the Fremantle district, 1374 men and 285 women were classed as being unemployed and, of those, 719 men and 208 women were classed as having no income.<sup>11</sup> These latter individuals were single men and women, and therefore not entitled to the

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<sup>5</sup> ABS, 461.

<sup>6</sup> Michal Bosworth and David Hutchison, "City of Fremantle: Thematic Historical Framework," (Fremantle: Fremantle City Council, 1995), 78.

<sup>7</sup> Bosworth and Hutchison, *City of Fremantle*, 78.

<sup>8</sup> G.C. Bolton, "Unemployment and Politics in Western Australia", In *The Great Depression in Australia*, edited by Robert Cooksey, Labour History, Number 17, Canberra: Australian Society for the study of Labour History, 1970, 80.

<sup>9</sup> Broomhill, *Unemployed Workers*, 13.

<sup>10</sup> ABS, 493-499.

<sup>11</sup> ABS, 500-505.



## Chapter Two

sustenance payments made available to married breadwinners. In East Fremantle, 302 men and 65 women were classed as unemployed, of which 150 men and 35 women had no income, which was disproportionately lower than Fremantle's other districts. In North Fremantle, 286 men and 52 women were classed as unemployed, with 148 men and 29 women having no income. In the Roads District, 142 men and 19 women were listed as unemployed; 110 of the men and 11 women had no income.<sup>12</sup>

Estimating the actual number of unemployed people in the Fremantle districts from the census data is almost impossible. Its figures mask the full extent of unemployment and underemployment, being hidden by such categories as 'part-time', 'working on own account', 'criteria not stated,' and 'grade not applicable', which included pensioners and 'other dependents'. Many were therefore under-employed with full unemployment narrowly avoided by intermittent casual work, reduced hours or inventive attempts at self-employment. On the waterfront, lumpers were always casually employed, their work unreliable and intermittent (as discussed in Chapter Three). This precarious situation was made worse by declining trade during the Depression.<sup>13</sup>

Principal opportunities for male employment in the Fremantle City Council district were in commerce, finance, and of course, the waterfront, which was classified under 'water transport'. Manufacturing, road and rail building and land-based transport also employed sizable numbers. Nearly 400 men were employed in administration or professional roles, and 197 in personal or domestic service. There were 113 fishermen, most of whom were Italian migrants. White-collar roles included employers as well as employees, but the majority of employment in the district was men working in working-class jobs, in a largely working-class community. Married women were rarely employed outside the home, although many did paid work in it and some had boarders. Single or other women who found work outside the home mostly did so in the manufacturing, commerce, finance and administration sectors—not domestic work, as may have been expected, although domestic work was the largest single category. Men on pensions included those in receipt of disability pensions from wartime injury and trauma. The higher numbers of female pensioners reflected the higher numbers of war widows. All these figures are summarised in Table 2.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> ABS, 500-505.

<sup>13</sup> "Fremantle News and Views". *Westralian Worker*, May 20<sup>th</sup> 1930, 6.

<sup>14</sup> ABS, 493-499.

**Table 2: Main Employment types for men and women in Fremantle City Council District, from the 1933 Census.<sup>15</sup>**

<b>Employment Type</b>	<b>Men</b>	<b>Women</b>
Commerce and Finance	1048	381
Water Transport	832	-
Manufacturing	790	232
Road, Rail and Earthworks	778	-
Land Transport	446	-
Admin and Professional	393	303
Building	221	-
Personal and Domestic Service	197	502
Fishing	113	-
Pensioners	373	545
<b>Total number of breadwinners</b>	<b>5844</b>	<b>2133</b>
<b>Number of dependent children under 16</b>	<b>2601</b>	<b>6420</b>

In North Fremantle, a slightly higher proportion of men worked in blue-collar industries than in Fremantle itself, indicating the importance of the wharf and its related industries to that small community. The Dingo Flour Mill had opened in 1922 and Ford had a nearby assembly plant. Women in North Fremantle were commonly employed in manufacturing jobs such as food production, clothing and textiles, with the Weeties factory in North Fremantle and the Mills and Ware biscuit factory in South Fremantle being two of the local employers of women.<sup>16</sup> Similar numbers of women were employed in commerce and finance, administration and professional roles, and domestic service. Figures for the North Fremantle Council District are shown in Table 3.

**Table 3: Main Employment types for men and women in North Fremantle, from the 1933 Census.<sup>17</sup>**

<b>Employment Type</b>	<b>Men</b>	<b>Women</b>
Commerce and Finance	145	55
Water Transport	102	-
Manufacturing	232	60
Road, Rail and Earthworks	205	-
Land Transport	69	-

<sup>15</sup> ABS, 493-499.

<sup>16</sup> Bosworth and Hutchison, 80.

<sup>17</sup> ABS, 493-499.

Admin and Professional	50	61
Building	36	-
Personal and Domestic Service	20	64
Pensioners	65	124
<b>Total number of breadwinners</b>	<b>1050</b>	<b>393</b>
<b>Number of dependent children under 16</b>	<b>463</b>	<b>1202</b>

By comparison, East Fremantle was relatively affluent, which was reflected in the proportion of its men and women who worked in commerce, finance, administration and professional roles, though the district still records sizeable numbers of men employed in manufacturing, road, rail and land transport, as well as work on the waterfront. Twice as many women were employed in commerce and finance than in manufacturing, which was the largest employment category for women living in the area. The figures for East Fremantle are shown in Table 4.

**Table 4: Main Employment type for men and women in East Fremantle Council District, from the 1933 Census.<sup>18</sup>**

<b>Employment Type</b>	<b>Men</b>	<b>Women</b>
Commerce and Finance	396	138
Water Transport	257	-
Manufacturing	304	60
Road, Rail and Earthworks	115	-
Land Transport	154	-
Admin and Professional	121	86
Personal and Domestic Service	19	129
Pensioners	80	125
<b>Total number of breadwinners</b>	<b>1707</b>	<b>593</b>
<b>Number of dependent children under 16</b>	<b>787</b>	<b>2031</b>

Statistics from the emerging suburbs within the Fremantle Roads District, presented in Table 5, reveal the region had a predominantly male workforce. Its men worked mostly in agriculture and market gardens, or on road and rail works. Many were migrant labourers from Yugoslavia and Italy. Even still, a significant number of men from these outer suburbs were employed in commerce and finance.

<sup>18</sup> ABS, 493-499.

**Table 5: Main Employment type for men and women in Fremantle Roads District, from 1933 Census.<sup>19</sup>**

<b>Employment Type</b>	<b>Men</b>	<b>Women</b>
Farming and Agriculture	319	-
Manufacturing	73	14
Road, Rail and Earthworks	140	-
Commerce and Finance	92	11
Personal and Domestic Service	9	33
Pensioners	46	29
<b>Total number of breadwinners</b>	<b>875</b>	<b>110</b>
<b>Number of dependent children under 16</b>	<b>396</b>	<b>840</b>

The 1933 census reported information regarding the grade of occupation (employer, self-employed, employed) and there was little to separate the communities in relation to the proportions of these employment types. Of the men who were residents in the Fremantle City Council district, 199 were employers, 461 self-employed, 2320 wage earners, 755 part-time wage earners, 77 apprentices and 1374 were unemployed. The 57 female employers in the Fremantle Council district was disproportionately high, compared to the six female employers in East Fremantle and the four each within the North Fremantle and Fremantle Roads districts.<sup>20</sup> Also notable, as well as the high numbers of unemployed across the four districts, are the small numbers of apprentices for this largely industrial area (being 135 men and 13 women across all four districts).<sup>21</sup> This can be explained by the economic slump and also by the large number of unskilled jobs in the area.

#### *Affluence and Income*

The stated wages earned revealed the varying levels of affluence in the four districts. At the time, the federal basic wage was £3.10s per week, or £180 per year.<sup>22</sup> The relative affluence of East Fremantle is evident from the figures. 21% of male wage earners earned less than £52 per year, whilst 22% of men earned more than £260. Fremantle had three times the population of East Fremantle, and had 24% of male wage earners who earned less than £52 but only 9% who earned more than £260.<sup>23</sup> At this upper end of annual earnings, the contrasts between East Fremantle

<sup>19</sup> ABS, 493-499.

<sup>20</sup> ABS, 493-499.

<sup>21</sup> ABS, 500-505.

<sup>22</sup> Lowenstein, 12-13.

<sup>23</sup> ABS, 509.

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and North Fremantle and the Roads District is even greater, with just 57 wage-earning males in North Fremantle (6% of male wage earners) and 36 (or, 4%) in the Roads District earning these higher amounts, both districts having about half the male population of East Fremantle. Though much lower numbers apply, the pattern for wage earning women across the districts show a similar trend.<sup>24</sup>

### *Conclusions*

It is clear from the 1933 census that Fremantle districts felt the full impact of economic depression. There was real poverty, reflected in the unemployment figures and the numbers of people on low or no incomes. Equally important in all districts are the invisible figures, those Fremantle residents, most of whom were men working away at the time of the census, receiving relief work in the government's work camps.

Overall, the picture given by the census data is one where the Fremantle area, bounded by the four districts, was predominantly working-class, with several industries dominating and serving to unify. Unemployment levels remain difficult to accurately measure, due to the hidden figures within the data that masked unemployment and underemployment. The waterfront, along with transport, retail and commerce drove the local economy. However, women were emerging as a significant number in the workforce, notably in industries other than domestic service. These women were mostly unmarried, but some were married breadwinners supporting the family due to male unemployment or wartime bereavement. East Fremantle had its share of poverty, but was more affluent than the other districts, especially North Fremantle and the Roads District, with a greater proportion of the population in higher income brackets.

These pockets of affluence show that despite the size of its working-class, Fremantle's population was complex and divided, where local capitalism produced a substantial number of employers, many of whom retained their affluence during the depression. It also produced substantial numbers of employees working in commerce and finance, administration and professional work. Together with the figures in income, the occupational breakdown show a quite substantial middle class, with a small population of wealthy individuals, who we know from other sources, made up a strong and wealthy merchant-class.<sup>25</sup>

The figures also suggest that Fremantle was divided on class lines and they provide a good basis for a discussion on the relationships between community and class in Fremantle, as argued by Taksa and discussed above. These will be examined in the next two chapters, which explore in

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<sup>24</sup> ABS, 511-512.

<sup>25</sup> Patricia M. Brown, *The Merchant Princes of Fremantle: The rise and decline of a colonial elite, 1870-1900*, Nedlands W.A., UWA Press, 1996.

turn, significant hardship, local attempts to alleviate poverty and class tensions arising from industrial and political struggles in Fremantle and the growth of radical politics in Fremantle later in the decade.

## Chapter Three

# STANDING IN THE STORM UNEMPLOYMENT, INDIGNITY AND DEFIANCE

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Everyone was poor—some of the kids never got a feed all day. The Salvation Army used to bring soup for the kids who had nothing. The kids that did bring a cut lunch had a corner cut off by Miss Stewart, who would give it to the kids with nothing.<sup>1</sup>

This sharp and emotive memory, recalled by a former pupil at Fremantle Primary School, highlights the painful experience of many local children during the inter-war years, particularly from 1930 to 1933. Evidence of such personal experiences in Fremantle during this era is harrowing. As unemployment levels rose steeply, there was general concern about the plight of the unemployed and how to tackle the issue. A large public meeting on the Perth Esplanade in February 1930 attracted many concerned business people.<sup>2</sup> A deputation made up of unemployed men and representatives of the ALP Metropolitan Council was given an uninspiring response by the acting premier, Labor's John Willcock, who claimed a lack of funds prevented the government from creating effective solutions.<sup>3</sup>

On the same day, the stress of being unemployed was highlighted in a case at the Fremantle Children's Court. There, a 17-year-old male was charged with having attempted suicide by poisoning; he was "worried" about being unemployed. The young man was bound over on a "good behaviour bond" of £10.<sup>4</sup> In separate other incidents that year, two unemployed family men from Perth, depressed at their situation, took poison in attempts to end their lives; both were rushed to Perth Hospital for treatment.<sup>5</sup> Pride, self-esteem, masculinity and status, in and out of the home, were being battered by the economic storm.

This chapter will address the challenges faced by the unemployed to survive the 1930s, particularly in the first half of the decade when the Depression was in full bite and unemployment levels peaked. Whether in or out of work, families suffered hardship, degradation and loss of opportunity as industries slumped. In the early days of the Depression, the Fremantle community

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<sup>1</sup> Karen Lang and Jan Neuman, *Wharf Rats and Other Stories: 100 Years of Growing up in Fremantle*, (Brennan

Street, Fremantle Primary School, WA 6160: Fremantle Primary School P&C Association, 2008), 85.

<sup>2</sup> "Relief Demanded". *The Daily News*, February 21<sup>st</sup> 1930, 6.

<sup>3</sup> "Meeting on Esplanade". *The West Australian*, February 21<sup>st</sup> 1930, 24.

<sup>4</sup> "Lad Attempts Suicide". *The Kalgoorlie Miner*, February 21<sup>st</sup> 1930, 4.

<sup>5</sup> "Two Men Poisoned". *The West Australian*, June 12<sup>th</sup> 1930, 11.

seemed to come together to support those who had lost their jobs. Fremantle's local councils attempted to alleviate the worst effects of the slump, despite inadequate resources and minimal state government support. Civic politics tried to address basic needs like food, fuel and shelter with limited funds. For families, this was a dire period; for single men and women, the situation was often worse.

Yet within this Fremantle community were several fault lines. While Fremantle's business and middle class came together with the local labour movement to support charitable attempts to relieve unemployment and the Fremantle council put itself at the forefront of these efforts, divisions arose between the unemployed and labour movement on one side and the Fremantle Council on the other, as the Council began organising relief works for the unemployed. Divisions also arose between local unemployed radicals and the existing labour movement. Many Fremantle workers became politicised as a result. The local trade union branches, rank-and-file Labor members, unemployed people, and communists challenged government policy and employers; they mobilised the community to fight pay cuts, worsening work conditions and inadequate unemployment relief. In doing so, they faced organised repression by the state, part of a government strategy to clamp down on any radical activity.

In relation to Political Process Theory, the examples that follow will show a working-class community of unemployed and employed workers, who saw political opportunity arising from their grievances about pay, unemployment relief and general living conditions during the 1930s. These grievances were expressed through existing and new organisations in the community, where demands were formed and articulated and activity generated to build support and force claims. These actions in turn created reactions from government and state forces to suppress these movements and reduce opportunities for success. These conditions sharpened class politics and divided both the Fremantle community and the Fremantle labour movement, but formed a militant and radical community, in solidarity with the unemployed and striking workers.

At this point it is necessary to reiterate the key points of Political Process Theory. The theory is used here to help understand the history of Fremantle's radical movements, how they grew and, where appropriate, why they declined. The five stages of the theory are described in table 6 below.



**Table 6: Stages of community activism, as identified within Political Process Theory.**

Stage	Features
1. Political Opportunity	Arises when genuine grievance develops and the existing order is questioned or weakened. Also explains checks and repressive measures that restrict opportunity and growth.
2. Mobilising Structures	Existing community structures and groups provide organisation, leadership and social connection, leading to new organisations.
3. Framing	Problems and solutions are formed and articulated into demands.
4. Protest Cycle	Organised activity generates publicity, solidarity and momentum, and attracts new supporters.
5. Contentious Repertoires	Action and agitation forces claims. Action includes strikes, demonstrations, marches, community defence. These actions may increase repressive measures and opposition that reduces further political opportunity and creates decline in the movement.

### *Survival and civilian politics in Fremantle*

The main problem for unemployed single men in Fremantle in the first year of the Great Depression was that they were not provided for by government sustenance, which only applied to married men. The Fremantle Wesley Church opened a soup kitchen in 1929, and in its first fortnight was feeding one hundred and sixty six men regularly. A locally organised charitable fund, led by the council, local dignitaries and church leaders, issued meal tickets daily between 10.15am and 11am at the Town Hall. Tickets were issued by the local Labor Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA), J.B. Sleeman, and Reverend Nye from the local Methodist Church.<sup>6</sup> Concern about this growing number of single unemployed men and their plight, resulted in local municipal councils putting together support schemes to distribute food and provide funding for hostel beds, if families or friends could not provide support. In April 1930, Fremantle's mayor Frank Gibson, who was also a local businessman, chaired a well-attended meeting at the Town Hall, to address the council's response, which was energetic and genuine in seeking solutions.<sup>7</sup> The outcome of

<sup>6</sup> Michelle McKeough, "A Council and Its Crises: Challenge and Response in Fremantle's Community During Three Times of Crisis - the Bubonic Plague, the Great War, the Depression Era." Phd, Murdoch University, 2016, 148-149.

<sup>7</sup> "The Unemployed. Relief for Single Men". *The West Australian*, April 5<sup>th</sup> 1930, 16.

this was the formation of a committee with two divisions: one to provide support for single men and women, and another for married men.<sup>8</sup> Led by the local municipal councils, the Fremantle community had begun to pull together.

A Citizens Unemployed Relief Committee operated out of a disused tram office building in High Street. This committee, chaired by Sleeman, provided charitable relief to single men and women, including dormitory accommodation in the High Street building for seventy men, rent assistance, clothing, firewood and milk.<sup>9</sup> Later, accommodation for one hundred single men was provided at the Immigrants' Home on South Terrace.<sup>10</sup> The committee's income came from private and business donations, and from the state government, but it was a constant struggle to meet demand. A similar committee was formed in East Fremantle in May 1932.<sup>11</sup> Calls were made for clothing and food donations to support this local scheme. Single women who were unable to be supported in the family home, were placed in domestic service in Perth or country towns; arrangements provided to men were not viewed as appropriate for young women.<sup>12</sup> These basic and minimal provisions staved off starvation and homelessness, but were an inadequate and undignified measure for men and women who wanted work and proper pay.

Anger had been building in the metropolitan area for some months. A rally of two hundred unemployed protesters in February at the Perth Esplanade condemned conditions and demanded "toil not sustenance", criticising the level of sustenance pay and the quality of subsidised food. Critical of the Labor government's weak response to the crisis, one speaker said that he wondered "if Collier could live on a shilling a day".<sup>13</sup> Later, in May, protests over the quality of food at one of the relief depots led to fighting with police outside the Premier's Department in Barrack Street and the arrests of eight men.<sup>14</sup> Consensus was giving way to displays of dissent.

Responsive to the growing social and personal problems created by rising unemployment, Fremantle Mayor Gibson established a 'Special Committee', which included one member from each of the council's relief committees. Its purpose was to assist the unemployed by providing cash for work, such as planting trees and laying footpaths.<sup>15</sup> This activity placed great strain on council finances, as funds were overdrawn and diverted to work creation schemes.

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<sup>8</sup> "Unemployment". *Fremantle Advertiser*, May 1<sup>st</sup> 1930, 1.

<sup>9</sup> "Shelter at the Port". *The West Australian*, June 4<sup>th</sup> 1930, 10.

<sup>10</sup> McKeough, *A Council and its Crises*, 168.

<sup>11</sup> "At East Fremantle". *The Sunday Times*, May 22<sup>nd</sup> 1932, 12.

<sup>12</sup> McKeough, *A Council and its Crises*, 168.

<sup>13</sup> "Unemployed Meeting". *The Daily News*, February 24<sup>th</sup> 1930, 3.

<sup>14</sup> "Unemployment Position Acute". *Kalgoorlie Miner*, May 28<sup>th</sup> 1930, 4.

<sup>15</sup> McKeough, *A Council and its Crises*, 155-156.

In May 1930, James Mitchell's newly installed National-Country Party coalition state government announced that a thousand men would be allocated to the Main Roads Board on road-building projects, one hundred and forty men allocated to the Railways Department to lay track, and forty to fifty men allocated to wharf-building work in Fremantle. Mitchell hoped, in vain, that these work-for-relief projects would "go a long way to breaking the back of the unemployment difficulty".<sup>16</sup> Unemployed registrations at the Labour Bureaus continued to climb, however. At Fremantle's bureau, the number of registrations increased by four hundred and twenty two in the month of May alone.<sup>17</sup>

In July 1930, the fortnightly meetings of the Fremantle District Council of the ALP condemned the Mitchell government and employers for using the unemployment issue to undercut award rates, so eroding hard-fought gains.<sup>18</sup> Gibson proposed that the state divert sustenance money to councils to allow them to provide local work-for-sustenance schemes, mainly necessary road-building projects. The federal government had allocated £192,000 to Western Australia in a grant at the end of 1929, to be spent on road building to alleviate unemployment.<sup>19</sup> Fremantle used its £5000 share on this work; the two issues of road building and unemployed relief work were inseparable to Gibson.<sup>20</sup>

Local unemployed men were also put to work cutting and distributing firewood to the needy.<sup>21</sup> Much of this work was arduous and the men, through inexperience, lack of strength or under-nourishment, often unsuited to it. By 1933, the council's Parks and Ovals Committee had taken over the coordination of all the local sustenance workers who were put to work in beautification projects at local parks and gardens.<sup>22</sup>

Despite the nature of the Council's work and its poor pay rates, there was no shortage of men willing to sign up, Yet the first cracks in the Fremantle community's resolve began to appear as the unemployed began to object to the Fremantle Council's policies. In 1930, in what may have been the first example of collective action by Fremantle's unemployed, a petition, signed by one hundred and thirty men, condemned the pitiful conditions they were living in and demanded work to allow them to provide for their families.<sup>23</sup> The unemployed were beginning to see political opportunity, mobilise and articulate demands.

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<sup>16</sup> "Unemployment". *The West Australian*, May 5<sup>th</sup> 1930, 17.

<sup>17</sup> "Unemployment Crisis". *The Western Mail*, June 12<sup>th</sup> 1930, 5.

<sup>18</sup> "Fremantle News and Views". *Westralian Worker* July 25<sup>th</sup> 1930, 6.

<sup>19</sup> McKeough, *A Council and its Crises*, 153.

<sup>20</sup> McKeough, *A Council and its Crises*, 160.

<sup>21</sup> McKeough, *A Council and its Crises*, 167.

<sup>22</sup> State Records Office, W.A. "Parks and Ovals Committee, February 6<sup>th</sup> 1933", In *Fremantle Correspondence, Unemployed, 1931-33, AU WA S3644, 1933/045*.

<sup>23</sup> McKeough, *A Council and its Crises*, 157.

Numerous letters from desperate men to the Town Clerk appear in the Council's correspondence archives, requesting help in obtaining work. James Shepherd, the Town Clerk, had the unenviable job of attempting to satisfy these requests as far as possible within the meagre council resources available. He used all his contacts to create individual solutions, often directing men to attend local pick-up depots.<sup>24</sup>

Locals also requested assistance from the Premier's office, with charitable relief available for some from the McNess Fund, a charity established by philanthropist Sir Charles McNess. In one letter to a local Fremantle woman, the Premier's Department requested her attendance to collect a parcel of clothing for her family of five children. The woman's husband, working half-time as a sewerage worker, earned £2.2s, less than the amount the family would have earned on sustenance (£2.9s).<sup>25</sup>

Although men were in desperate circumstances, some were willing to show defiance in the face of unfair working conditions or heavy-handed supervision by site foremen, again an example of the unemployed seizing political opportunity. One example from files within the State Records Office is a note from a works supervisor to the Town Clerk dated July 1933. This described the suspension of fifteen men for refusing to handle heavy stone unless they were paid an additional shilling a day. A follow-up-letter signed by all the men on the job to the Town Clerk reported unfair treatment towards them by the supervisor and requested his intervention.<sup>26</sup> In another example, eighty unemployed men from North Fremantle met at the Town Hall to consider their own grievances in relation to work and its management. They called for a petition to have a public meeting with the council to discuss these grievances further, following complaints by two of the men about the "vindictiveness" of a council foreman.<sup>27</sup>

Cracks had also begun to appear in Fremantle's labour movement, this time as radical unemployed activists began to assert their presence and the moderate labour movement tried to exclude them. The unemployed had much earlier formed their own committee, what we can call a new mobilising structure, to negotiate with the council in organising and representing men on work schemes. This led to tension with both the council and the local ALP District Council, both of which were fearful of, and hostile to, communist influences among the unemployed. E.A. Gray, the local member of the State Legislative Council, had in the early months of the Depression

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<sup>24</sup> State Records Office, W.A. "Unemployed", In *Fremantle Council Correspondence 1933, AU WA S3644, cons 1377, 1933/045*.

<sup>25</sup> State Records Office, W.A. "McNess Fund – Applications for assistance from February 24<sup>th</sup> 1932", In *Premier's Department, 1932, AU WA S36, Cons 1703, 1932/134*.

<sup>26</sup> State Records Office, *Unemployed. Fremantle Council Correspondence*.

<sup>27</sup> "Sustenance Workers". *The Sunday Times*, March 20<sup>th</sup> 1932, 6.

exclaimed: "There were no communists amongst the unemployed in Fremantle!"<sup>28</sup> This was wishful thinking, because the unemployed men had appointed an active member of the Militant Minority Movement (MMM) to represent them, which irked both the District Council of the ALP and Mayor Gibson.<sup>29</sup>

Mayor Gibson engineered alternative representation by organising a meeting at the Town Hall that excluded about twenty of the supporters of the MMM and the unemployed men's representative. Less radical representatives of the unemployed were therefore elected, reported by the press to be "loyal workers".<sup>30</sup> However, this change of representation did not stop the MMM and CPA members from protesting at future meetings. A meeting of the unemployed on the Fremantle Esplanade in September 1931 heard from MMM speakers, reported in the press as making "fantastic demands" of the government.<sup>31</sup> In October, another gathering of the unemployed, this time at the Fremantle Trades Hall, heard CPA members condemn the government's relief schemes and call for a boycott of pick-up points.<sup>32</sup>

In a sign that the Fremantle working class was also becoming unhappy with the existing relief arrangements and wanted to assert its own position, the Fremantle ALP set up its own Fremantle Advisory Unemployed Committee in 1931. The committee (another new mobilising structure, but this time based in the ALP) comprised local party organisers and trade union officials and so became one of several local advocacy committees run by either the ALP, Fremantle Council or by the unemployed themselves. In 1932 it requested improved conditions for sustenance workers from the Fremantle Roads Board District, stating that the men were "ill-fed" for such heavy work.<sup>33</sup> The Roads Board District men's grievances about conditions had rumbled about for some time. In 1932, it approached Minister John Scaddan to ask for men receiving less than 35 shillings (£1.15s) to be given paid government work, as they were compelled to take work for bare sustenance or have their money stopped. Mr Cole of the Committee said this amounted to "forced labour". Scaddan, however, was unmoved by the appeals.<sup>34</sup> This strategy of sending deputations to government was a regular action taken by the unemployed throughout the Depression.

Later that year, Labor's committee moved to take control of the independent unemployed men's committee, and in November there was a protracted meeting between the

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<sup>28</sup> "Communist Activities". *The Daily News*, October 24<sup>th</sup> 1930, 1.

<sup>29</sup> The Militant Minority Movement was a C.P.A. Fraternal organization, active in the trade union movement and industry.

<sup>30</sup> "Fremantle Unemployed". *The Daily News*, April 29<sup>th</sup> 1931, 4.

<sup>31</sup> "Communist Demands". *Sunday Times*, October 18<sup>th</sup> 1931, 12.

<sup>32</sup> "Extremists in Charge". *The Daily News*, October 10<sup>th</sup>, 1931, 9.

<sup>33</sup> "Sustenance Workers". *The Sunday Times*, February 7<sup>th</sup>, 1932, 12.

<sup>34</sup> "Unemployment". *The West Australian*, February 6<sup>th</sup> 1932, 18.

two bodies. Attempts by the ALP to bar participation of “four well known communists” were rejected, but the men’s committee agreed to be taken over by the ALP committee, provided they delete any clause excluding communists. The independent unemployed men’s committee then ceased to exist.<sup>35</sup> Clearly, the political opportunity for an independent organisation was constrained by the power of the existing Labor hierarchy. Acrimony between the ALP and CPA was clearly evident—they were, after all, rivals for the loyalty of the unemployed. This incident was possibly an outcome of the CPA’s philosophy of the “Third Period”, and its hostility towards Labor, but the ALP had been hostile to the Communist Party since the party branch was formed in Western Australia in 1931. An earlier meeting of the ALP Unemployed Advisory Committee condemned the CPA as “callous”, and praised the local unemployed for rejecting the “false gospel of the self-elected champions of workers”.<sup>36</sup>

For men in regular work, a reduction in working hours was also commonplace, particularly on the waterfront where workers, even in a good week, would take home little more than the basic wage.<sup>37</sup> Lumpers’ work was always irregular and casual, dependent on demand for loading and unloading on any particular day. Work, when available, often involved long hours to get the job done quickly. With the decline in trade due to reduced demand, work became even more irregular and scarce. As early May 1930, four hundred waterside workers turned up at Fremantle Town Hall to discuss ways of improving work distribution.<sup>38</sup> However, despite the shortage of work, many were reluctant to sign up for sustenance pay, even when their reduced earnings entitled them to do so.<sup>39</sup>

This situation would have been significantly worse, had the Mitchell government succeeded in introducing the bulk handling of goods at the waterfront; however, he failed to pass legislation in October 1932 to establish a monopoly trust to operate a bulk handling system. At the height of the Depression, when waterfront jobs were already insecure, it was estimated that a bulk handling scheme would have resulted in the displacement of five to six hundred lumpers, with an annual loss of £80,000 in wages to the local economy.<sup>40</sup> Mitchell’s inability to grasp the political and economic consequences of this plan showed he was either out of his depth in managing the economic crisis, or extremely confident in taking on the lumpers and Fremantle

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<sup>35</sup> “Back to A.L.P.”. *The Daily News*, November 5<sup>th</sup> 1932, 1.

<sup>36</sup> “Fremantle News and Views”. *Westralian Worker*, November 4<sup>th</sup> 1932, 5.

<sup>37</sup> Stuart Macintyre, *Militant: The Life and Times of Paddy Troy*, (Sydney: George Allen & Unwin, 1984), 76.

<sup>38</sup> “Fremantle News and Views”. *Westralian Worker*, May 20<sup>th</sup> 1930, 6.

<sup>39</sup> “Fremantle News and Views”. *Westralian Worker*, July 4<sup>th</sup> 1930, 6.

<sup>40</sup> Malcolm Tull, *A Community Enterprise: The History of the Port of Fremantle, 1897-1997*, (New Foundland, International Maritime Economic History Association, 1997), 176.

community.<sup>41</sup> However, the issue would not disappear. In 1935, a Royal Commission recommended the introduction of bulk handling to create efficiency and reduce costs.<sup>42</sup>

For women, many were not covered by awards and often did not earn the basic wage. Collier, when returned to government in 1933, later tried to address this issue, only to be met by fierce opposition from employers.<sup>43</sup> The Shop Assistants union was unable to defeat applications to the Arbitration Council to reduce wages, which affected many women.<sup>44</sup>

Evictions were also on the rise, as families struggled to pay rent and still meet basic needs. In July 1931, a combined meeting of the Fremantle, Metropolitan and Midland Junction Districts of the ALP met to discuss sustenance and eviction. That month, the *Westralian Worker* reported that the average rent owed by tenants was £16 and that six hundred and thirty four applications for financial relief had been made to the Housing Commissioner under the *Tenants, Purchasers and Mortgages Relief Act 1930*, with three hundred and twelve support orders made in response. The *Worker* acknowledged that the majority of tenants were trying to meet their obligations and that many landlords were also struggling.<sup>45</sup> The ALP meeting produced no radical demands or proposals, despite the precarious state of many households.<sup>46</sup>

Locally, in Fremantle, the meeting of the Unemployed Advisory Committee of the ALP discussed the issue and what action was needed to protect those threatened with eviction.<sup>47</sup> The meeting discussed the formation of local protection committees, but there is no evidence of any being formed or taking action against bailiffs and protecting tenants' property. The *Westralian Worker* does report correspondence from an East Fremantle man to the ALP District, acknowledging the support his family received in preventing their eviction.<sup>48</sup> It seems more likely, therefore, that the local ALP, through its secretary J.W. Burgess, performed an advocacy role in eviction proceedings, rather than coordinating direct action to stop them. In North Fremantle, the Town Clerk corresponded with the local ALP, indicating that a number of ratepayers wanted to pay off their arrears by doing work for the council.<sup>49</sup>

Sleeman attempted to push a Tenant's Protection Bill through parliament that proposed no tenant would be evicted if they were earning less than the basic wage without a State

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<sup>41</sup> Tull, *A Community Enterprise*, 173.

<sup>42</sup> Tull, *A Community Enterprise*, 177.

<sup>43</sup> Sally Kennedy, *Segregation for Integration: Women and Work in Factories and Shops in Western Australia During the Great Depression*, in *"Bosses, Workers and Unemployed"*, *Studies in Western Australian History* V, Edited by Lenore Layman, Nedlands: University of Western Australia, 1982, 42.

<sup>44</sup> Kennedy, *Segregation*, 45.

<sup>45</sup> "Rent, Tenant and Landlord Hardships". *Westralian Worker*, July 31<sup>st</sup> 1931, 5.

<sup>46</sup> "Unemployment". *The West Australian*, July 13<sup>th</sup> 1931, 10.

<sup>47</sup> "Position at Fremantle". *The West Australian*, September 24<sup>th</sup> 1931, 10.

<sup>48</sup> "Fremantle News and Views". *Westralian Worker*, September 11<sup>th</sup>, 1931, 5.

<sup>49</sup> "Fremantle News and Views". *Westralian Worker*, October 9<sup>th</sup> 1931, 5.

Commissioner of Housing order.<sup>50</sup> This bill was defeated by the National-Country Party coalition in the Legislative Council. At an MMM meeting on the Fremantle Esplanade, however, more radical demands were formulated, or framed, in the language of PPT. Eight demands were made from the platform:

1. No rent, no evictions, and accommodation paid by government.
2. No cutting off of the electric light.
3. Free train passes, once a day, from the suburbs to Perth and Fremantle.
4. Free passes for picture shows.
5. New clothing provided by government.
6. Full rations.
7. Unemployed single men and women paid allowances if living at home.
8. Double allowances for expectant mothers.<sup>51</sup>

The *Sunday Times* scoffed at these “fantastic demands, foisted upon a gallery of unemployed”.<sup>52</sup> However, the issues of rent, electric power, clothing, and food supplies within households with meagre incomes created real anxiety for unemployed families. The demands also showed that the unemployed had a very clear idea that the state was responsible for their welfare while they were unemployed, indeed that they had the right to relief and other forms of assistance. The demands also revealed how removed many families were from normal daily expectations because of this poverty, like being able to catch a train to the city or go, once in a while, to see a film at the local cinema. They provide a picture of grinding poverty and deprivation for unemployed families, with little respite or cheer.

Fremantle Council added to the pressure on local unemployed families by eventually appointing a rates arrears collector and paying him £1 per week plus 20% commission on collections. At first, there was an attempt to add 5% interest on the arrears, but this was defeated at council by one vote. By 1933, though, the penalty was finally introduced by a council chamber desperate to ensure its own financial viability.<sup>53</sup> This also increased the pressure on small business, some landlords and homeowners, already being squeezed by rent arrears, reduced community spending and demand for their goods and services. The council’s earlier attempts at community harmony and support were showing clear signs of strain as it tried to balance the books.

The general picture of unemployment in Fremantle then, was of severe hardship. Governments—commonwealth, state and local—attempted to soak up the unemployed in poorly

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<sup>50</sup> “Pith of Parliament”. *The West Australian*, October 14<sup>th</sup> 1931, 8.

<sup>51</sup> “Militant Minority’s Demands”. *The West Australian*, October 16<sup>th</sup> 1931, 16.

<sup>52</sup> “Communitistic Demands”. *The Sunday Times*, October 18<sup>th</sup> 1931, 12.

<sup>53</sup> McKeough, *A Council and its Crises*, 187.



paid schemes that barely lifted families out of starvation. In the process, union work and award gains through the arbitration courts were undermined by work-for-relief schemes that would spark reaction from unemployed workers demanding dignity and fair pay for their work. Class and political tensions, often with the labour movement, created political opportunity and activism as the existing order was questioned by workers, but also repression and betrayal which limited opportunity.

To a limited extent, Fremantle's unemployed had begun to establish their own sense of community out of their shared experiences. The gatherings of unemployed in Fremantle, with and without trade union and political presence, provided opportunities to share grievances and experiences, discuss and challenge the failure and weakness of government response, and provide informal and formal structures that mobilised activism. The local neighbourhood connections also provided cohesion and a shared experience that would assist in formulating demands for change.

Yet, more in Perth than Fremantle, these community connections and collective experiences created mass protests which were met by swift, repressive and sometimes violent responses by police. What became known as the 'Treasury Riot', was the first major clash in this era and would have consequences for the state's response to future disputes, as will be examined when looking at the Fremantle Wool Stores strike, a remarkable episode, just a few months later. In these two examples we see the whole PPT process in operation.

### *The Treasury Riot*

In terms of PPT, Perth's biggest organised protest march by unemployed men and their supporters could be described as a significant example of the protest cycle, as unemployed men publicised their plight. This, the famous Treasury Riot of 6 March 1931, involved clashes with police on Saint George's Terrace. Street protests in the form of demonstrations and marches had become part of the customary protest cycle of workers to raise awareness, promote support from the public and press their demands.<sup>54</sup> The events of this day were the culmination of attempts by unemployed workers to lobby the state government for paid work or improved support. Leaflets had been issued on the march that framed demands and these had been already been presented in full by a deputation of the unemployed to Minister Scaddan.<sup>55</sup> He indicated that he would await Mitchell's return from a visit to the east coast and pronounce on the requests. When, following

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<sup>54</sup> Macintyre, *Reds*, 191.

<sup>55</sup> Salmon, *Treasury Riot*, 54.

Mitchell's return, no response came, the unemployed men agreed to march on the Treasury Building, the main government office in central Perth, to press their case.<sup>56</sup>

At least two thousand unemployed workers assembled in Barrack Street on the Esplanade, to march up to Saint Georges Terrace. Among them were men from Fremantle, some who later held a meeting on Fremantle's Esplanade to condemn the behaviour of police on the march and the sentences imposed on arrested protesters.<sup>57</sup> When the marchers reached the intersection with St Georges Terrace trouble began. One speaker said the marchers didn't want trouble, but if the police were violent, the men would fight back. Who started the fighting is unclear, but fighting there was, after the march was blocked by foot and horse police. The ensuing crush and tension on Saint Georges Terrace created hand-to-hand fighting between marchers and police that lasted nearly an hour. Marchers used makeshift weapons such as broken fence posts to defend themselves against police batons. An estimated seven thousand looked on from nearby streets and pavements, no doubt in shock at the action and reaction.<sup>58</sup> This took place, after all, on Perth's premier avenue. In PPT terms, protest had developed into action that could be categorised as part of the contentious repertoire, as the men engaged in physical combat with police.

The police and press were quick to attribute blame to communist agitators and many of those arrested were known communists or sympathisers, targeted by police. The conservative press highlighted the presence of "non-Australian accents" on the speaker's platform and visible banners with "Russian Soviet emblems".<sup>59</sup> This narrative of the community outsider as troublemaker was a persistent theme in press and police reports. Police Commissioner Robert Connell minimised the men's grievances and claimed the protest was all a communist plot.<sup>60</sup> One of those arrested included Syd Foxley, who stood accused of inciting the riot by striking Inspector Johnston, a man who openly hated communism. Later, including at the meeting on Fremantle's Esplanade, there were widespread calls for Johnston's dismissal due to his brutality on the day. A leaflet, headlined "Black Friday", produced and circulated at the time (author unknown but likely a CPA linked publication), and archived in police files, called for Johnston to be dismissed for being a "menace".<sup>61</sup> One witness gave sworn testimony that he saw Johnston "rushing at the

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<sup>56</sup> Alex Salmon, "The 1931 Treasury Riot", In *Radical Perth, Militant Fremantle*, Edited by Charlie Fox, Bobbie Oliver and Leonore Layman, (Perth WA, Black Swan Press, 2017), 54.

<sup>57</sup> "Unemployed Meeting: Last Sunday". *Fremantle Advertiser*, March 26 1931, 1.

<sup>58</sup> Alex Salmon, "The 1931 Treasury Building Riot", In *Radical Perth, Militant Fremantle*, edited by Charlie Fox, Bobbie Oliver and Lenore Layman, Perth, W.A.: Black Swan Press, 2017, 54.

<sup>59</sup> "Clashes with Police". *The West Australian*. March 7<sup>th</sup>, 1931, 13.

<sup>60</sup> Alex Salmon, *Treasury Riot*, 56.

<sup>61</sup> State Records Office, W.A. "Clash between Unemployed and Police." In *Police Correspondence, 1931, AU WA 430, 1931/2426*.

crowd...I don't know why he did it".<sup>62</sup> Another sworn testimony stated that he heard a policeman say "Hop into the bastards!".<sup>63</sup> A letter from the Police Commissioner to the Minister for Police stated that he considered the protest was "directed from the central communistic (sic) body and...of the eleven men charged as a result of rioting...ten of them candidly admit they were communists".<sup>64</sup> The MMM also seems to get a mention by Connell in his five-page letter: "Any old pretext is good enough for these so-called Militant Minority to work up the passions".<sup>65</sup>

The police and government's fear of and paranoia about communism and militancy was evident. Communist banners were visible on the march, and it is clear from the arrests that communists were both conspicuous to, and targeted, by police. This fear would shape tactics and responses to future disputes and activity, to prevent the growth of militant ideas and organisation and this applied to both unemployed and employed workers. An opportunity came within a few months of the Treasury Riot for the state to demonstrate its readiness to try and break industrial militancy, when Fremantle Wool Store workers called a strike over repeated pay cuts. The government could not afford to allow the wool industry to come to a standstill, as revenue from wool exports was vital. On this occasion, however, the employers and government were unsuccessful in quashing organised industrial action amongst the working-class in Fremantle.

#### *The Fremantle Wool Stores strike*

On 8 December 1931, the West Australian Employers' Federation Inc., sent a letter to the Commissioner of Police informing him that the workers at the Fremantle Wool Stores had begun strike action as a protest against reduced pay and conditions. The letter outlined the Federation's intention to bring in volunteer labour from country areas. Their plan was to set up temporary accommodation for the incoming workers at Ascot racecourse, east of Perth. Anticipating a reaction from Fremantle workers to the plan, the letter requested support in "providing the fullest possible police protection".<sup>66</sup> So began a dispute that set the labour movement against capital, the working-class community against employers.

The dispute began when the Wool Store workers, members of the Shop and Warehouse Assistants Union, voted to go on strike due to a further wage cut imposed by wool stores employers including Elder, Smith and Co., Goldsborough, Mort and Co., Dalgety and Co., and Westralian Farmers Ltd. The cut of 8 shillings and 2 pence a week, introduced as part of the

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<sup>62</sup> State Records Office, Clash between Unemployed and Police.

<sup>63</sup> State Records Office, Clash between Unemployed and Police.

<sup>64</sup> State Records Office, Clash between Unemployed and Police.

<sup>65</sup> State Records Office, Clash between Unemployed and Police.

<sup>66</sup> State Records Office, W.A. "Instructions re: calling in police from country centres." In *Police Correspondence, 1931, AU WA 430, 1931/9200*.

Financial Emergency Legislation linked to the Premiers Plan, was on top of the cut in the basic wage of 13 shillings and 6 pence that had already been imposed by the Arbitration Court.<sup>67</sup>

The workers had placed their dispute with the local ALP Fremantle District Council Disputes Committee, the Party's negotiating body, under the secretaryship of J.W. Burgess. He was sent to negotiate with the Employers' Federation. With no agreement on the cuts, the workers went on strike on 20 November. Local support from other union branches in Fremantle was swift. The Lumpers Union branch was called to help at picket lines,<sup>68</sup> whilst resolutions of support were passed at the Fremantle Branch of the Clerks Union and the Amalgamated Road Transport Workers Union.<sup>69</sup>

The strike was a significant one for the Western Australian economy. Here was a genuine grievance, a double cut in wages creating political opportunity to challenge employers. Existing mobilising structures in the Fremantle labour movement lent support to the wool store's workers union, support which increased as the protest activity began. The strike, part of the contentious repertoire of union action, delayed sales of wool with an estimated value of £300,000 in November, and the same amount again in December, as wool remained unloaded in the stores.<sup>70</sup> The response by the Police Commissioner to the letter received by the Employers' Federation was immediate. On the same day it was received, he sent telegrams to regional police inspectors at Geraldton, Kalgoorlie, Northam, Pinjarra and Narrogin. The tone of the telegram was urgent and revealed how the police regarded this dispute and their preparedness to support strikebreaking and quell militancy:

Cancel all leave, call in all men on leave and arrange for following men to come to Perth immediately and bring full equipment, including revolver and ammunition with them (STOP). Where constable mounted horse must also be brought (STOP). Arrange with District Superintendent railways regarding conveyancing horses (STOP). Dongarra: one mounted; Geraldton: one mounted, three foot; Mingenew: one mounted; Mullewa: one mounted; Northampton: one mounted; Three Springs: one mounted; Yalgoo: one mounted.<sup>71</sup>

The request from the Employers' Federation came as the strike looked like it may escalate; more local unions joined to support workers' demands for a restoration of pay rates. The employers wanted to ensure the January wool sales were not prevented from happening. The Employers' Federation hoped that country woolgrowers would come voluntarily to Perth, but the

<sup>67</sup> "History of the Trouble". *The West Australian*. December 10<sup>th</sup> 1931, 13.

<sup>68</sup> "Position at Fremantle". *The West Australian*. December 5<sup>th</sup> 1931, 16.

<sup>69</sup> "Support for Strikers". *The West Australian*. November 27<sup>th</sup> 1931, 19.

<sup>70</sup> "Wool Trade Dispute". *Western Mail*. December 10<sup>th</sup> 1931, 21.

<sup>71</sup> State Records Office, Instructions re: calling in police from country centres.

request was met with hostility from farmers. In Pingelly, for example, the Employers' Federation letter, written by its secretary L.L. Carter, was firmly rejected. The woolgrowers thought the matter was for arbitration and that it was not their business to intervene.<sup>72</sup> However, the police had increased repression to limit political opportunity for success, and 197 men were charged and processed through the local court for going on strike. The men included Burgess and R. Bourke, the secretary of the union. All pled not guilty, but were convicted under section 129 of the *Arbitration Act*, which forbade strike action during arbitration.<sup>73</sup>

The Wool Stores strike ended when the President of the Arbitration Court recommended that the strikers return to work and be paid at the old rates instituted before the implementation of the Financial Emergency Legislation cuts, with the agreement that they would uphold the Arbitration Court's decision on their appeal against the imposition of the cuts. At a "long and heated debate" among the strikers, held at the Fremantle Trades Hall in Collie Street, they voted in favour of the proposal, but only by a slim majority of 139 to 120. No doubt those who rejected the proposal were wary of the decision of the Arbitration Court, but they would have been under severe financial pressure to return to work having been on strike for 3 weeks. The men returned on 10 December with their income restored, awaiting the decision of the appeal at arbitration. The Employers' Federation wrote again to the Police Commissioner to thank him for the provision of police support, no longer needed, and he in turn alerted the country stations by wire, a day after his first urgent telegram, to stand down the men and horses on their way to Perth.<sup>74</sup>

In the new year of 1932, the *Westralian Worker* triumphantly announced a victory for the wool workers when the Arbitration Court supported the union's appeal against the cut in wages.<sup>75</sup> Further, the police court magistrate sentenced the strikers to only minimal fines of 5 shillings each, or 12 hours in the lock-up; Burgess was fined £1. This was a significant win for workers in the Depression when most industrial disputes in Australia failed. The significance of wool to the economy and the failure of the Employers' Federation to generate an army of country workers to break the strike were likely factors in the willingness of the Arbitration Court to settle the case favourably for the workers. These factors provided political opportunity to the union to press their claim.

The local solidarity of Fremantle's other unionists and the cohesion of the local labour community also added strength to the strike. The existing working-class community structures helped assert demands and create action to back them. The willingness, however, of the police to

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<sup>72</sup> "Pingelly Growers Refuse to Assist". *Western Mail*. December 10<sup>th</sup> 1931, 10.

<sup>73</sup> "Police Court Proceedings". *The West Australian*. December 8<sup>th</sup> 1931, 9.

<sup>74</sup> State Records Office, Instructions re: calling in police from country centres.

<sup>75</sup> "Fremantle News and Views". *Westralian Worker*. January 1<sup>st</sup> 1932, 5.

use armed force to repress strike action and curtail political opportunity revealed their fear of working-class militancy in the wake of the Treasury Riot that occurred just a few months earlier.

### *The Dispersal of Unemployed*

Fremantle's unemployed men had been assigned to sustenance relief work, mostly around Fremantle, building roads and other earthwork projects, but also to Blackboy Hill and the southwest region. Most unemployed men from Fremantle worked on local work projects or were sent to the rural southwest. A contingent of ninety men went to Harvey from Fremantle in 1932, to work on irrigation and drainage projects.<sup>76</sup> At Frankland River, forty miles west of Mount Barker, the government also established an archipelago of camps, where men were put to work clearing trees. It is likely that Fremantle men were sent there too, as they were to other camps.

These camps were wretched places and the Frankland River project was one of the largest and worst. By mid-August 1932, the *West Australian* reported that the camp was up and running; the first contingent of men arrived on the August 13<sup>th</sup> and soon about eight hundred men were working there.<sup>77</sup> The conditions were inadequate; tents leaked, drinking water and sanitation were poor; the food was of marginal quality; and the men were provided with inadequate clothing. Soon resentment and anger grew as genuine grievances developed. The congregation of men in the camps after work, with little to do other than sleep, mend clothes, write letters or play cards, fomented the conditions for demands for better conditions and fair pay. Here was a situation resonating with political opportunity.

Apart from the living conditions, many of the men sent there were totally unsuited to the work. One young worker's recollections of the conditions sums up the daunting challenge to survive. He wrote: "We went out to work. I was given an old man of sixty-seven for a mate. He was not used to bush work; didn't know how to use an axe".<sup>78</sup> To add to the misery of this work, the pay had been set to piecework rates, rather than a daily rate. It was impossible to make a living at the rates offered, because the work was so slow and heavy. As the young man continued: "I realised it would take us ten days to earn the 25 shillings we were supposed to earn in two days. That meant we couldn't even make our store account".<sup>79</sup>

The initial rate offered to the men was £2 per acre, cleared. This rate was quickly increased to £5 an acre as the impossibility of the job became clear to all. Older residents of the

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<sup>76</sup> McKeough, *A Council and its Crises*, 181.

<sup>77</sup> "Country News". *The West Australian*, August 20<sup>th</sup> 1932, 11.

<sup>78</sup> Justina Williams, *The First Furrow* (Willagee, W.A., Lone Hand Press, 1976), 125.

<sup>79</sup> Williams, *The First Furrow*, 125.

area considered £13 to £15 an acre more appropriate.<sup>80</sup> The situation reached breaking point as the wet, winter weather worsened conditions. A mass meeting at the main camp on 19 August 1932 called for work to cease and framed their demands, the main one being that the men be returned to Perth by free transport. A call for a secret ballot was rejected and the site was declared “black”, to be boycotted. A report, filed by Sergeant George King from Albany, named George Schneider, “a communist who speaks with a foreign accent,” as being the event’s main speaker. Again, like the Wool Stores strike and Treasury building unemployed march, police were on heightened alert towards militant leaders, especially those they considered to be outsiders with communist leanings.<sup>81</sup> The press also highlighted “communistic (sic) influences”.<sup>82</sup>

The response by Mitchell was both swift and dismissive. His avuncular image was increasingly giving way to displays of impatience and intolerance as he struggled to cope with the scale of the Depression and its problems. He sent a telegram to the men, ordering them back to the camp. After the message was read out, the men carried the following motion “with acclamation”: “We will ignore the Premier’s message just as our wires to the responsible Minister have been ignored”.<sup>83</sup> The same report also notes that another telegram from Perth communists, offering to arrange a demonstration at the Central Station, was also ignored. Many of the men were determined to promote an image of working-class respectability, not radical militancy.

Here was a new kind of strategy in the men’s contentious repertoire. Nearly three hundred men left for Perth on a train from Mount Barker, with locals showing solidarity with the strikers.<sup>84</sup> When the train reached East Perth station next morning, the train was stopped, and the men ordered off by police. The engine was de-coupled from the carriages, the leaders arrested and led away, and the men left stranded in the rain. Despite this indignity and provocation, the men were reported as remaining orderly.<sup>85</sup> Six men were arrested at East Perth, identified as leaders of the strike by the police. They were charged, though, with the petty offence of travelling without tickets.<sup>86</sup> They included Alfred Schneider, who was reported in the press as being an atheist from South America. Of the remaining five, two were from New South Wales, one was from Nova Scotia, one from England and one from Ireland. Again, the press focussed on the presence of outsiders and foreigners in the midst of the dispute.

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<sup>80</sup> “Unemployment and Politics in Western Australia.” In *The Great Depression in Australia*, edited by Robert Cooksey. Labour History Number 17. Canberra: Australian Society for the study of Labour History, 1970, 93.

<sup>81</sup> State Records Office, W.A. “Strike of Sustenance Workers.” In *Police Correspondence, 1932, AU WA 430, 1932/6173*.

<sup>82</sup> “200 Men March on Mount Barker”. *The Daily News*, August 22<sup>nd</sup> 1932, 1.

<sup>83</sup> “Premier’s Orders to Marchers”. *The Daily News*, August 24<sup>th</sup> 1932, 1.

<sup>84</sup> “Relief Work Dispute”. *The West Australian*, August 25<sup>th</sup> 1932, 13.

<sup>85</sup> “Frankland River Unemployed Leave Train”. August 25<sup>th</sup> 1932, 1

<sup>86</sup> “Frankland Men Fail to Reach City”. *The Daily News*, August 25<sup>th</sup> 1932, 1.

A rally at the Perth Trades Hall rejected the government's demand for the men to return to the camp and called for solidarity with the six arrested men. Minister Scaddan's comments on the strike were read out to the meeting: "the government will not permit a band of communists to take charge of the affairs of the state", he proclaimed. He also claimed that the CPA had "white-anted" the camp.<sup>87</sup> The mood of the meeting was defiant, determined to continue to press for a fair daily pay rate and improved conditions. A protest cycle developed as the men's grievances developed into a protracted dispute as they refused to return to the intolerable conditions.

The relief workers were banned by the Police Commissioner from further marching, stating that this was all a "communistic (sic) method of provoking civil commotion",<sup>88</sup> whilst the six arrested men were fined the default train fare of £1.1s, plus costs of 16s.5d each, and were freed with a caution.<sup>89</sup> The government increased the pressure by refusing any further material support for the men whilst they remained in Perth.<sup>90</sup> Newspapers began to report the solidarity of trade unionists with the strikers, with the Fremantle Lumpers branch mentioned as giving the strike its full support.<sup>91</sup> The Fremantle District Council of the ALP also gave full support, as did the Amalgamated Engineering Union (AEU), which condemned the "slave labour conditions offered...by the government at Frankland River".<sup>92</sup> The Perth AEU Branch Secretary, Tom Fowler, in a letter written to the *Daily News*, however, was scathing of the Labor leadership's "impotence" in supporting the men.<sup>93</sup>

The strikers stepped up their protest cycle to publicise their case and generate solidarity. With support from the labour movement and CPA, a demonstration was planned for the city on 12 September, one day after a large meeting on the Perth Esplanade. On this occasion, the plan was to gather outside the Treasury Building but scatter speakers to the balcony corners of Hay Street and Barrack Street, to confuse, out-fox and divert police. Although the speakers were pulled down from their strategic posts by police, the demonstration was able to keep the dispute in the public's eye. The police made 18 arrests, including Alfred Schneider who was charged with addressing the crowd in Barrack Street without permission.<sup>94</sup> Four of the men were later acquitted at the Supreme Court of charges of unlawful assembly. Again, the press was quick to highlight *foreign* communist involvement, with the *West Australian* at the forefront, publishing a

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<sup>87</sup> "Frankland Marchers Reject Government's Terms". *The Daily News*, August 26<sup>th</sup> 1932, 1.

<sup>88</sup> "Street Marching". *The West Australian*, August 29<sup>th</sup> 1932, 15.

<sup>89</sup> "Train Jumpers in Court". *The Daily News*, August 29<sup>th</sup> 1932, 1.

<sup>90</sup> "Frankland River Demonstrators Still Defy Government". *The Daily News*, August 27<sup>th</sup> 1932, 1.

<sup>91</sup> "Train Jumpers in Court". *The Daily News*, August 29<sup>th</sup> 1932, 1.

<sup>92</sup> "Union Supports Men". *The Daily News*, August 27<sup>th</sup> 1932, 1.

<sup>93</sup> "Frankland Men". *The Daily News*, September 5<sup>th</sup> 1932, 6.

<sup>94</sup> "City Clash". *The West Australian*, September 13<sup>th</sup> 1932, 9.



letter that blamed them for “edging on (sic) their comrades”.<sup>95</sup> The demonstration strategies, part of the men’s contentious repertoire of protest, was creating unease in government and establishment circles. These men were supposed to be quietly out of sight, not agitating in the centre of Perth for fair conditions.

The state labour movement’s response to the strikers was to call on them to place their faith in their ALP Disputes Committee and abide by the outcome of the negotiations. At a meeting of the Unemployed Council, a broad community body dominated by Labor and Trade Union officials, the meeting said it was “impossible for the labour movement to protect them”.<sup>96</sup> Although the government had agreed to some of the demands, such as establishing a medical camp at the site, they would not negotiate on the demand for day rates rather than piece rates, until the men returned to the camp, and repaid their train fares.

Solidarity by Fremantle’s working-class community towards the strike remained strong. At a large meeting on the Fremantle Esplanade on 18 September, solid support was expressed for the men. This solidarity, the failure of Labor to persuade the striking men to return to Frankland and allow the Disputes Committee to negotiate on their behalf, and the presence of CPA activists in the camp, began to concern the state government and police. Commissioner Connell is quoted as having “been convinced for some time that communistic (sic) propaganda was behind industrial disturbances”.<sup>97</sup>

This increasing alarm led the police to raid the properties of ten CPA activists, including the home of Katharine Susannah Prichard and three addresses in Fremantle. Whilst no arrests were made, papers and correspondence were seized, and prosecutions considered by Commonwealth authorities using recent amendments to the *Crimes Act*.<sup>98</sup>

The following week, four plain clothes and mounted police accompanied a government officer to a visit to the Immigrants Home in Fremantle where unemployed single men were staying. There, he called for twenty men to go to work at Frankland River to replace strikers. Knowing the camp was blacklisted, all one hundred men at the home refused to attend, despite the intimidating presence of police. The men were reported as peaceful but indifferent to the pressure to respond to the request.<sup>99</sup> The attempt to use police to help recruit labour in Fremantle for the camp had failed. A chalk sign, written near the home, read: “Frankland River Black”.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> “To the Editor”. *The West Australian*, September 13<sup>th</sup> 1932, 10.

<sup>96</sup> “Labour Movement Position”. *The West Australian*, September 15<sup>th</sup> 1932, 11.

<sup>97</sup> “Dramatic Police Coup”. *The West Australian*, October 1<sup>st</sup> 1932, 17.

<sup>98</sup> “Dramatic Police Coup”. *The West Australian*, October 1<sup>st</sup> 1932, 17.

<sup>99</sup> “No Response”. *The Daily News*, October 11<sup>th</sup> 1932, 1.

<sup>100</sup> “Frankland River Jobs”. *The West Australian*, October 12<sup>th</sup> 1932, 10.

The protracted dispute continued and whilst there were concessions on the conditions at the camp for the men remaining there, the men considered the piece-work pay rates were still too low to make a living.<sup>101</sup> Minister for Lands, C.G. Latham, indicated there was no more money but conceded that many of the men who had been sent there were unsuited to the work.<sup>102</sup> Eventually, the strikers were either replaced by other unemployed men willing to work at the camp, or returned through desperation. The government agreed to set up a board to set future piece rates, provided the men agreed to its decisions.<sup>103</sup> Ongoing complaints about the piece rates continued however, until the change of state government led to the closure of Frankland River and the introduction of different sustenance arrangements for the unemployed.<sup>104</sup> It is astounding that these men remained on strike for over six months at the peak of the Depression, despite police and government repression that aimed to reduce political opportunity and stop protests. The striking men carried out this activism despite a lack of leadership from Labour leaders, which forced the men to take matters into their own hands, to create and mobilise their own informal activist structures.

Later, in 1934, at the Harvey work camp, where Fremantle men were sent, another dispute arose; this concerned the decision by the government to force men to join the AWU. Instead the men wanted to join the Relief and Sustenance Workers' Union (RSWU), also named the Metropolitan Labourers Industrial Union, another example of a mobilising structure. Although the men supported unionism, they refused to be forced into the AWU and to have to pay AWU dues. Indeed, after lengthy periods of unemployment most were already in arrears with their own trade unions.<sup>105</sup> Three hundred men went on a one-day strike in protest and their refusal led to four of them being dismissed. This led to a protracted dispute and much bitterness between the men at the camp and the AWU. The three men, married with twelve children between them, were barred from claiming sustenance and directed to report to Perth's Marquis Street depot for other work. However, when they turned up they were told that Labor Minister J.J. Keneally had issued instructions that they were "on no account to be dealt with at the depot".<sup>106</sup> Here was another example of restricting political opportunity, this time by the state Labor government.

A state conference of part-time and sustenance workers in Perth condemned the AWU's "conscription", whilst a conference of unions affiliated to the ALP also met to discuss the

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<sup>101</sup> "Frankland River Clearers". *The West Australian*, December 13<sup>th</sup> 1932, 8.

<sup>102</sup> "Activities of Labour". *Westralian Worker*, December 2<sup>nd</sup> 1932, 5.

<sup>103</sup> "Activities of Labour". *Westralian Worker*, April 28<sup>th</sup> 1933, 5.

<sup>104</sup> Williams, *The First Furrow*, 128.

<sup>105</sup> State Records Office, W.A. "Dismissal of Sustenance Workers at Wagerup through refusing to join the A.W.U.: Dispute." In *AU WA 536. Cons 1496, 1934/0120*.

<sup>106</sup> State Records Office, Dismissal of Sustenance Workers.

situation, concerned about the approach of the AWU towards the men.<sup>107</sup> Rank-and-file union and party activists were sympathetic towards the RSWU, and, importantly, in Fremantle, the fledgling union was welcomed into the Trades Hall building and given space to work. Given the presence of Fremantle men in the southern work camps and their struggle for survival, this solidarity is understandable. In April 1934, T.J. Hughes, secretary of the Relief and Sustenance Workers' Union, served a writ on the AWU and Premier Collier on behalf of the three men. This came to nothing, as the fledgling union was dissolved in 1934 after its application for registration to the Arbitration Court was rejected.

The AWU's hold over trade union membership in the work camps and the support given it by the government ensured that a more radical union of unemployed relief workers could not survive, so keeping militancy in check. It reduced political opportunity to agitate for better conditions as it prevented radical voices in the camps from influencing branch voting and maintained the right wing hold in the union. The long running Frankland River dispute had occurred in spite of, not because of, the AWU leadership, who offered little to break the long-running deadlock or use their strength to fight for the men.

The Council Against Unemployment was a later organisation that enjoyed support when it was established in 1938 and it was successful in achieving concessions. It campaigned for better conditions for the unemployed and supported strike action by relief workers, particularly strikes at Leonora, Wiluna and Pemberton road-building camps over working hours and lack of union conditions.<sup>108</sup> One victory was the establishment of rest rooms in the city in William Street, which also served as the headquarters of the organisation.<sup>109</sup> A Fremantle branch was established in May 1938 and Eillen Perry, one of the founding members, spoke of the hostility by the "official element" of unions and Labor, which did not want to see another militant body in their midst.<sup>110</sup> At a meeting in the Fremantle Kings Hall in May 1938, relief workers, their wives and friends demanded that the right to use the Trades Hall for CAU meetings and called for the labour movement to be rebuilt.<sup>111</sup> Despite the end of the Comintern's Third Period Line and the beginning of calls for a united front with Labor against fascism and reactionary forces, local tension, distrust and rancour remained.

Communist activists in Fremantle continued to demand improved conditions for the unemployed. Paddy Troy, who moved to Fremantle in 1938 and was working on the traffic bridge that crossed the Swan River, spoke at a meeting of one hundred and fifty men at the Trades Hall

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<sup>107</sup> State Records Office, Dismissal of Sustenance Workers.

<sup>108</sup> "Council Against Unemployment". *The Workers Star*, May 19<sup>th</sup>, 1939, 5.

<sup>109</sup> Williams, *The First Furrow*, 150.

<sup>110</sup> "Trade Unionists Support Unemployed". *The Workers Star*, 20<sup>th</sup> May 1938, 1.

<sup>111</sup> "Unemployed Upsurge". *The Workers Star*, May 6<sup>th</sup> 1938, 6.

in 1939 and called for increased ration rates of 10 shillings a week, from 7 shillings to cover rises in the cost of living. He argued that if the governments could find millions for war, they should provide for the unemployed.<sup>112</sup> A month later, Fred Wayma stood for the North Fremantle Council, the first time a communist candidate stood for local council office in the state.<sup>113</sup> Within months of this, after the CPA was banned by the Commonwealth government, Troy and many of his comrades would be in jail.<sup>114</sup>

*Later Unrest in Fremantle: Bus drivers, the waterfront and women*

A number of industrial disputes took place in Fremantle in the later years of the 1930s, though the worst of the Depression was over. One involved drivers and conductors in the Amalgamated Road Transport Workers Union working for the South Suburban Omnibus Company Ltd., the Metropolitan Bus Company, and its offshoot, the Perth-Fremantle Omnibus Company Ltd. The strike arose when the drivers' eight-hour shift was spread over twelve hours, to cover peak periods. Police alleged striking workers were sabotaging buses by letting down tyres, breaking windows and removing drivers. These actions were examples of strategies in the union's contentious repertoire of activity, to disrupt services and win the dispute. Again, the police were involved in breaking the strike by escorting non-striking bus drivers on motorcycles along their routes.<sup>115</sup> This allowed a skeleton service to run. This strike lasted throughout October 1936, during which time the union was threatened with deregistration by the Arbitration Court unless drivers returned to work. In the end, the dispute was referred to a Board of Reference to adjudicate, which recommended amendments to rosters be introduced.<sup>116</sup>

Several waterfront disputes arose in the mid-1930s over conditions and job security. In January 1935, the Lumpers Union called a strike over the handling of cement and the dangers of being exposed to dust from the sacks. The ship, *Arkaba*, stood idle whilst the men argued for an extra shilling an hour plus two additional "smokos".<sup>117</sup> The dispute underlined the dangers the men were exposed to, without adequate clothing or protective gear. In another dispute, the Lumpers Union raised objections over the bulk handling of wheat to the ships from the loading machine.<sup>118</sup> Bulk handling had been a contentious issue for a number of years, as workers rightly feared job losses. This brief dispute was part of the ongoing tension between a government that

<sup>112</sup> "Unemployment Grows". *The Workers Star*, October 13<sup>th</sup> 1939, 1.

<sup>113</sup> "Communist Candidate for Councillor". *The Workers Star*, November 10<sup>th</sup> 1939, 1.

<sup>114</sup> Macintyre, *Militant*, 61.

<sup>115</sup> State Records Office, W.A. "Strike of Omnibus Drivers." In *Police Correspondence, 1936, AU WA 430, 1936/6051*.

<sup>116</sup> "Bus Board Submits Amended Rosters". *The Daily News*, January 12<sup>th</sup> 1937, 7.

<sup>117</sup> "Waterfront Dispute". *The West Australian*, January 7<sup>th</sup> 1935, 13.

<sup>118</sup> "Fremantle News and Views". *Westralian Worker*, February 8<sup>th</sup> 1935, 3.

had been determined to introduce bulk handling to reduce costs and weaken waterside unions, and workers who were aggrieved at its implications for their livelihoods.

Women, too, were becoming more active in industrial struggles, particularly as the Depression eased and workers began fighting for improved pay and conditions after years of stagnation. Many played an active role in the formation and influence of the CAU, discussed above.<sup>119</sup> This increased class-consciousness and confidence amongst women workers was demonstrated in Fremantle, on July 31 1939, at the Mills and Ware Biscuit and Cake factory in South Fremantle, workers, men and women, went on strike over working conditions. The Coastal Food Manufacturers Union had called for a reduced working week from 48 to 44 hours and a 10% wage increase on the basic wage, but failed to win concessions in negotiation with the employer, resulting in the walkout of two hundred and sixty workers.<sup>120</sup> The workers in the factory were mostly young, and knew of the company policy of sacking workers when they reached adult pay rates. Local solidarity from other unions was strong, with the Lumpers Union donating £25 per week towards support. The strike also received active support from the Labor Women's Central Executive.<sup>121</sup> Here we see grievances being framed into demands, with local publicity generating wider support within the labour movement and working-class community. The strike action lasted over six weeks, until September 16, with remarkable courage from its mostly young male and female workers and shop stewards with no previous experience of industrial action. Unable to come to an agreement, the strike was ended with the company retiring the current award and an agreement to negotiate a new award, without recriminations, through the Arbitration Court.<sup>122</sup>

### *Summary and Conclusions*

The dispute capped a decade in which Fremantle's workers—employed and unemployed— had been forced to survive economic and material privation, enduring undignified living and working conditions. In this they were—as far as possible—supported by the local councils. The councils operated with limited resources but showed great determination to try and ease the suffering created by mass unemployment and economic depression. Yet, the stresses of the Depression wore down the sense of community with which first responses began and the Fremantle community started to fracture. . Unemployed workers had shown themselves willing and capable of fighting against austerity, poor conditions and exploitation, despite the economic climate that could have subdued militancy. In several campaigns by Fremantle's unemployed workers and

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<sup>119</sup> Williams, *The First Furrow*, 150.

<sup>120</sup> "Factory Hands Still Out". *The Daily News*, August 1<sup>st</sup> 1939, 1

<sup>121</sup> Oliver, "Unity is Strength", 149.

<sup>122</sup> "Cake Strike Ends". *The Daily News*, September 16<sup>th</sup> 1939, 16.

working men and women who organised themselves through their workplace union branches, Trades Hall and community organisations, they used these existing mobilising structures to defend their livelihoods and communities. This was most successful in the Wool Stores dispute; one of the few industrial victories by workers in this dark period. This victory was achieved despite organised repression by the state to reduce and repress political opportunity, especially by the use of police and the courts to try to break the strike. Working-class activists, notably from the Lumpers Union, showed generous solidarity with these strikers and with other workers involved in disputes, including those unemployed men in rural work camps.

It is clear that the Great Depression wrought changes in Fremantle. In the early days of the Depression, the Fremantle community seemed to come together. Yet, new social pressures proved to be irresistible as a sense of community seemed to develop amongst the unemployed, which both divided and confirmed the existing labour movement. Older divisions between labour and capital resurfaced later in the decade as working-class consciousness re-asserted itself and the union movement began to fight back against a dominant capital. As Fremantle exited the worst of the Depression it had become a town divided, with a closely-knit working class community organised and mobilised into class-conscious action. Some of these newly created structures will be examined in the next chapter, which examines Fremantle's response to the rise of fascism in both Australia and Europe.

## Chapter Four

# SICILIANS, SLAVS AND SPANIARDS IDEOLOGY IN THE PORT CITY

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We, the citizens of Fremantle, call on the state government to bring pressure to bear on the federal government to lift the current embargo operating against the lawfully elected government of Spain.<sup>1</sup>

So ended another rally and film screening at the Beacon Theatre in Fremantle, organised by the Spanish Relief Committee to raise money for food, clothing and medical supplies for civilians affected by the Spanish Civil War. The meeting was also another opportunity for a display of solidarity with Spain's elected Republican government, which was by then heavily under siege from General Franco's Nationalist military forces. Spain's war was first provoked by a military coup, orchestrated by conservative elements who protested the government's attempt to introduce reform, and to reduce the political and cultural influence of Spain's Catholic Church. Since the war's inception in 1936, the Nationalists had accepted help from Hitler and Mussolini's fascist states. Faced with an international embargo on foreign intervention, led by Britain, France and the United States, the Republican government received support only from the Soviet Union. Australia's Commonwealth government, complying with the embargo, declined to support Spain's government militarily, and prohibited civilians from volunteering support in Spain. The hands-off policy was supported by the Labor opposition in Canberra, whose leader was Fremantle's John Curtin.

The campaign in support of Spain's elected government, mainly channelled through the Spanish Relief Committees across the country, was the culmination of a decade of anti-fascist activity. In Fremantle, this activism arose in spite of Labor's leadership, as rank-and-file trade unionists, Labor Party members, communists, ethnic radicals and anti-war activists campaigned for peace and against the rising tide of fascism, in what one could argue was a cohesive anti-fascist community. This community articulated and framed demands through the existing labour movement and in newly created structures, resulting in a vigorous campaign of support for Spain's republic and protests against local displays of fascism. This was not just an ideological debate; rather, activists understood that it was essential to support Spain's Republic in order to halt the spread of European fascism and the likelihood of another war.

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<sup>1</sup> "Successful Aid Spain Rally at Fremantle". *The Workers Star*, September 16<sup>th</sup>, 1938, 1.

Pro-fascist ideology in Perth was spread largely by the Italian Consulate, which attempted to whip up support amongst Italian migrants. Whilst embraced by many Italians in Fremantle, with overt displays of nationalist pride, there was also political division in this community about support for Mussolini's politics. Although Italians regularly experienced prejudice in Australia's white society, Fremantle did not suffer the violent ethnic division seen in the gold mining city of Kalgoorlie, perhaps because local, class-conscious activism prevented organised displays of racism. This chapter will therefore examine the ideological mobilisations within the local Fremantle community in the fight against fascist politics—at home, and abroad. It will point to the importance of ethnic communities in this fight and to the growth of an anti-fascist community in Fremantle with the radical working-class prominent as the labour movement split over the issue of anti-fascism.

#### *Italians and Yugoslavs, and the Rise of Fascism*

As was revealed in the 1933 census, the Italian community constituted the largest, non Anglo-Celtic community in Fremantle, with several hundred members living in a small cluster of streets near the centre of town. They developed their own industries in fishing and market gardening, and sought work also on the waterfront. This was a largely self-reliant immigrant community that was able to survive the Depression relatively well. It had access to self-caught fish and rabbits, and self-grown fruit and vegetables.<sup>2</sup>

Once Mussolini was established in power in Italy, Fremantle's community of Italian migrants was exposed to pro-fascist literature and propaganda, promoted by the local consulate, which also supported the local fascist association. Community and cultural organisations were created by the Italian community across Perth and Fremantle, one of which was *Casa Degli Italiani* (Italian Houses), which provided community venues as mobilising structures for traditional cultural and political promotion.<sup>3</sup> There were numerous groups and associations meeting at these Fremantle venue, including *Dopolavoro* (the after-work association), *Donna Italiane* (a women's group), *Balilla* (a boy's group), and *Giovane Italiane* (a girl's group).<sup>4</sup> The Italian Consulate's plan was to establish the 'houses' throughout Australia, but only these two were opened. Whilst they had

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<sup>2</sup> Joseph Vincent Pensabene (1930-2016), "Italian migration, the fishing industry and the Pensabene family", Oral History Interview, Fremantle Library MP3CD No. 2, Access CD No. 458-460, OH/PEN Fremantle History Section.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Bosworth and Michal Bosworth, *Fremantle's Italy*, Roma: Gruppo Editoriale Internazionale, 1993, 85.

<sup>4</sup> Susanna Iuliano and Maria Gorman, *Fremantle Italians: A glimpse into the past. Uno sguardo nel passato....*, (Fremantle, ANFE, 2011), 19.



some success in establishing active support for fascism, they did provide structures for association and celebration of conservative Italian culture.

The Consulate also promoted the return of Italians to their homeland, with free passage from Italian shipping lines for those without funds. Vice Consul Citarelli, a staunch supporter of Mussolini, indicated that of the 3500 Italians in Western Australia in mid-1931, ninety-six of them had been repatriated. He also estimated that fifteen hundred of the Italian migrants were unemployed, so clearly the repatriation programme had little impact, even amongst the unemployed.<sup>5</sup> In the early 1930s the Consulate was also active in promoting Italian national causes, and some of these events were supported by Western Australian establishment figures. For example, a remembrance ceremony and mass, held at St Mary's Cathedral in Perth on 8 November 1931, was attended by Citarelli, Fremantle Mayor, Gibson, the Catholic Archbishop of Perth, the Deputy Premier, and the Mayor of Perth, who spoke from the podium. The mass was also attended by black-shirted fascists and Signor Marocco—the local fascist leader. In his speech, the Archbishop stated that there was “no greater bulwark against communism than fascism”, a sentiment which won applause from the audience.<sup>6</sup> The fear of communism in the Catholic Church would play out even more strongly during the Spanish Civil War later in the decade, when anti-communist and fascist sympathies were again promoted to Australia's Catholic congregations.<sup>7</sup>

Another Italian body, the *Associazionne Nazionale Combattenti*, (the National ex-Servicemen Association), was also supported by the Consulate and had a section in Perth, whilst the National Union of Italian Reserve Officers had a funded branch in Perth and schools to promote fascism (*Fascios*) in Perth, Fremantle and Wiluna.<sup>8</sup> There were eighty-six paid up members of these schools.<sup>9</sup> As late as 1936, the Italian Government donated books on Italy to the University of Western Australia for distribution to students, and the Italian Club in Fremantle received and distributed more pro-fascist propaganda.<sup>10</sup>

However, despite the weight of consular influence and propaganda, fascism divided the Italian community in Fremantle.<sup>11</sup> Local Italians established their own cultural institutions, reflecting their own political beliefs. Biago Seminara, a local barber (and illegal off-course bookmaker) who ran the *Giovane Italia* Club in Bannister Street, Fremantle, clashed with the

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<sup>5</sup> “Destitute Italians”. *Kalgoorlie Miner*, June 26<sup>th</sup> 1931, 4.

<sup>6</sup> “Fascist celebration”. *The West Australian*.” November 9<sup>th</sup> 1931, 10.

<sup>7</sup> “Spanish Relief Committee Attacked”, *The Workers Star*, April 16<sup>th</sup>, 1937, 4.

<sup>8</sup> Cresciani, *Fascism*, 77.

<sup>9</sup> Bosworth and Bosworth, *Fremantle's Italy*, 89.

<sup>10</sup> Cresciani, *Fascism*, 148-150.

<sup>11</sup> Bosworth and Bosworth, *Fremantle's Italy*, 88.

Consulate in Perth by allowing the distribution of socialist literature.<sup>12</sup> Members included Italians and non-Italians and even some local policemen,<sup>13</sup> reflecting Seminara's openness and pragmatism. This club was active until the war years (it was closed down by the government in 1940) and ran in opposition to the fascist *Casa Degli Italiani* (Italian Houses).<sup>14</sup> The club therefore provided a structure that gave opportunity to locals to challenge and question fascist ideology and strengthen Fremantle's anti-fascist community.

At the beginning of the decade, about six thousand Yugoslavs were living in Western Australia, most of whom worked in the mining and timber industries in the eastern goldfields and southwest. There were significant concentrations of workers in Kalgoorlie, as well as Wiluna. As discussed earlier, eighty two were recorded as living in the Fremantle Council District at the 1933 census.<sup>15</sup> Wiluna had its own left-wing Croatian and Serbian Workers' Club, which was particularly active in raising money for the Spanish Relief Committee.<sup>16</sup> In Perth, the Yugoslav Workers' Cultural and Educational Club (The Oreski Club) was the main focal point for Yugoslav workers, and the club had a visible presence at labour movement rallies and marches in Perth and Fremantle. This presence often included the Oreski Club's tamburitsa band, an entertaining symbol of Yugoslav culture and radical politics.<sup>17</sup>

Yugoslavs were involved in anti-fascist activities in the Fremantle area, as many of the Yugoslav migrants had fled both dire poverty and political persecution after the break-up of the Austro-Hungarian Empire at the end of the First World War. They therefore displayed a solid anti-fascist stance against their home government.<sup>18</sup> This was evident at a mass meeting organised by the Western Australian Yugoslav Consul, M. Marich, in June 1935.<sup>19</sup> The meeting had been arranged to call for a collection amongst Yugoslavs for a monument to the late King Alexander. However, in what is a good example of a mobilising structure, the crowd angrily opposed a monument to a leader who had waged "fascist terror" against minorities in the cause of Yugoslav unification. The hostile crowd also called for the Yugoslav Consul in Sydney to be sacked and replaced by a representative from the migrant Yugoslav community. The consul quickly closed the meeting down to minimise any further protest.

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<sup>12</sup> Bosworth and Bosworth, *Fremantle's Italy*, 69-71.

<sup>13</sup> Iuliano and Gorman, *Fremantle Italians*, 17.

<sup>14</sup> Bosworth and Bosworth, *Fremantle's Italy*, 85-89.

<sup>15</sup> "Destitute Yugoslavs". *The Western Australian*, March 28<sup>th</sup> 1931, 10.

<sup>16</sup> "To Save Spain!" *The Workers Star*, January 14<sup>th</sup> 1938, 2.

<sup>17</sup> Charlie Fox. "Yugoslavs and Inter-War Radicalism in Perth, 1918-1945." In *Radical Perth, Militant Fremantle*, edited by Charlie Fox, Bobbie Oliver, Lenore Layman. Perth WA, Black Swan Press, 2017, 90.

<sup>18</sup> Fox, *Yugoslavs*, 87-94.

<sup>19</sup> "Anti-fascist Victory". *The Red Star*. June 21<sup>st</sup> 1935, 1.

The presence of the nearby harbour meant the constant presence of foreign ships in Fremantle. Some of these were from Italy and, indeed, occasionally they included Italian war ships on tour through Australia. Shore leave for Italian sailors raised tensions on the streets of Fremantle, as pro-fascist and anti-fascist views were aired publicly. In one incident, a group of Italian sailors marched down High Street shouting pro-fascist slogans and giving the fascist salute.<sup>20</sup> This came just after one of the most shocking displays of racism seen in Australia when, in Kalgoorlie, in 1934, Italians, Greeks and Yugoslavs were attacked by white Australians.<sup>21</sup>

The Kalgoorlie riot, which took place over several nights at the end of January 1934, was the culmination of a build-up of racial tension over mining jobs in the town, with white mine workers refusing to work with about fifteen hundred “foreigners”, most of whom were Italian, Yugoslav or Greek migrants.<sup>22</sup> The riot began after a fight in the Home-from-Home Hotel, between Italian barman Claudio Mattaloni and a customer, George Jordan, resulting in Jordan’s death. A report to the Police Commissioner from Kalgoorlie’s Inspector Hunter, identified this as the “primary cause” of the subsequent rioting.<sup>23</sup>

The episode would undoubtedly have resonated with Italians and Yugoslavs in Fremantle, used to racist slurs and prejudice and to exclusion from the Fremantle community. For example, the local harbour where Italians moored their fishing boats was referred to pejoratively by some locals as “Dago Bay”.<sup>24</sup> The fear and alienation caused by the Kalgoorlie rioting would have ensured that the fascist and nationalist propaganda being distributed to the Italian community would at least have united them. Yet Bosworth and Bosworth described the community’s allegiance to fascism as “elastic”: sometimes tight, and sometimes loose. At the very least it fostered a sense of national identity and pride, though whether this was agreeable to all was another matter. It did resonate with some Italians who were struggling to integrate into Australian culture, faced with daily discrimination and prejudice.<sup>25</sup>

This national pride was publicly displayed in Fremantle in October 1934 when the Italian naval cruiser *Armando Diaz* docked on its way to Melbourne. Among the local dignitaries who welcomed the ship, was Fremantle Mayor Gibson. Italian fishing boats escorted the *Armando Diaz* into the harbour and a crowd of about five hundred lined Victoria Quay. Children wore fascist uniforms and many in the crowd gave the fascist salute.<sup>26</sup> National pride was also displayed when

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<sup>20</sup> Bosworth and Bosworth, *Fremantle’s Italy*, 84.

<sup>21</sup> Sarah Gregson, “It All Started on the Mines? The 1934 Kalgoorlie Race Riots Revisited”, *Labour History*, No. 80 (2001): 21-40.

<sup>22</sup> Goldfields Riots”. *Western Mail*, February 1<sup>st</sup> 1934, 8.

<sup>23</sup> State Records Office, W.A. “Racial Riots.” In *Police Correspondence, 1934, AU WA 430, 1934/700*.

<sup>24</sup> Cresciani, *Fascism*, 67-68.

<sup>25</sup> Bosworth and Bosworth, *Fremantle’s Italy*, 82.

<sup>26</sup> “Visiting Warships”. *The West Australian*. October 9<sup>th</sup> 1934, 17.

the local Italian community held a ceremony in Fremantle on 30 December 1935, in support of Mussolini's invasion of Abyssinia. Following a publicity campaign in *Il Giornale Italiane*, the local fishermen raised 46 ounces of gold, 24 ounces of silver and a "large sum of money" to support the invasion.<sup>27</sup>

This support was not universal amongst Italians, and the Fremantle Italian Club held heated discussions on the matter of Abyssinia and Mussolini's politics. At on one such meeting, many expressed their opposition to Mussolini, so opinion was equally divided. Some, who were naturalised Australians and also had memories of the Great War, wanted nothing to do with Mussolini's rhetoric.<sup>28</sup> These were men who had escaped dire poverty in Sicily to start a new life. Although they were subjected to daily prejudice and struggled to establish themselves, Italian politics was of no interest to them. For other, more class-conscious Italians, perhaps with letters from Italy telling stories of fascist brutality and repression, Seminara's Italian Club provided a more tolerant and less dogmatic venue and a mobilising structure for opposition to fascist propaganda.

There were attempts to promote support for German fascism in Australia too, and to forge links with Italian fascist supporters.<sup>29</sup> Class differences and an attitude of superiority to Italians negatively influenced these links, but the German Nazi organisation in Australia was influential in some areas, even though it was small.<sup>30</sup> There were organised groups of German Nazis in all the main cities, and an attempt in 1939, to establish a branch in Perth.<sup>31</sup> The publication of a weekly English-German dual language paper, *Die Brucke* (The Bridge), was published up until the start of the Second World War and promoted German fascist ideas and propaganda.<sup>32</sup> There is no evidence that this national publication had any significant presence or influence in Fremantle, despite the small German community recorded in the census data.

#### *Spain: International Solidarity in Fremantle*

The outbreak of civil war in Spain, following the failed military coup to overthrow the elected Republican government in July 1936, provided the platform for internationalist left-wing solidarity, co-operation and activism in support of democracy and against fascism. This was more than just ideological passion. The issue was framed on the belief that if military conservatism and

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<sup>27</sup> Cresciani, *Fascism*, 75.

<sup>28</sup> "Local Italians Divided on Views on Abyssinian War". *Mirror*. October 5<sup>th</sup> 1935, 1.

<sup>29</sup> John Perkins, "The Swastika Down Under: Nazi Activities in Australia, 1933-39", *Journal of Contemporary History* 26, no. 1 (1991): 116.

<sup>30</sup> Perkins, *Swastika*, 116.

<sup>31</sup> Perkins, *Swastika*, 115.

<sup>32</sup> Perkins, *Swastika*, 115.

fascism were not defeated in Spain, fascism would be emboldened to continue its military and political spread across Europe. A situation like that would inevitably lead to another European war, possibly another world war, in which Australia would doubtless be involved.

Although the worst of the Depression was over by 1936, many still suffered privations caused by lingering unemployment and poverty. The sharpened class-consciousness of those years ensured that workers were often more aware of the new ideological imperatives of world affairs, and more likely to watch events abroad. Many Fremantle workers, living in a port culture with international trade and relationships at its heart, understood the inter-relationship between their community and the rest of the world.

Britain and France hesitated, at first, to support the elected government of Spain, which hardened soon into the international Non-Intervention Pact signed by Britain, France, Germany, Italy, and the Soviet Union. There was no great belief, however, that the treaty's conditions would be adhered to by all parties.<sup>33</sup> A committee was established to supervise the non-intervention and met in London in September 1936, however, it dragged on for months with no real outcome.<sup>34</sup> Clearly, Italy and Germany were being duplicitous, as planes, armaments and support personnel were requested by and delivered to General Franco. The Soviet Union too, responded by sending tanks and armaments to the Spanish government. Russian roubles were converted to U.S. dollars and then to Spanish pesetas, but the Spanish government paid exorbitant conversion rates, which emptied its gold reserves.<sup>35</sup> In the November of 1936, however, the Russian tanks would help repel Nationalist rebel forces advancing on Madrid.<sup>36</sup>

The Australian government under "honest Joe" Lyons, and the Labor opposition under John Curtin, developed a bipartisan agreement that backed Britain's stance. However, Lyons, a staunch Roman Catholic, had recognised Franco as Head of State as early as October 1936.<sup>37</sup> The CPA, on the other hand, denounced Labor's lack of leadership and called for international solidarity with Spain's workers. In Sydney in August 1936, the Spanish Relief Committee was established. Most involved were communists or left-wing unionists and prominent liberal progressives like Nettie Palmer, who was active in the Melbourne branch.<sup>38</sup> A branch was established in Perth in February 1937, where the emphasis was on humanitarian aid, including the provision of food, clothing and medical supplies.<sup>39</sup> This was the key mobilising structure in forming

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<sup>33</sup> E.H. Carr, *The Comintern and the Spanish Civil War*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 18.

<sup>34</sup> Carr, *The Comintern*, 18.

<sup>35</sup> Gerald Howson, *The Untold Story of the Spanish Civil War*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 147-151.

<sup>36</sup> Howson, *Untold Story*, 27.

<sup>37</sup> Amirah Inglis, *Australians in the Spanish Civil War*, Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1987, 30.

<sup>38</sup> Judith Keane, *The Last Mile to Huesca: An Australian Nurse in the Spanish Civil War*. Sydney, (New South Wales University Press, 1988), 65.

<sup>39</sup> "Medical Relief", *The West Australian*, February 16<sup>th</sup> 1937, 15.

cohesive support for republican Spain in Perth and Fremantle. From the creation of this body, separate from Labor conservatism and influenced by communist party internationalism, an energetic programme of activity began.

Labor's isolationist position was driven by two agendas. First, it was aware that the public was reluctant to be drawn into another European war; the failure of the conscription referenda in 1916 and 1917 persuaded the leadership that there was no appetite for conflict. Secondly, about 20% of the Australian population (which was over six million at the time) was Catholic and the church was shocked by reports of anti-clerical violence in Spain and that churches and monasteries being burned, priests shot and nuns violated. These allegations from the pulpit appalled Catholics and made outspoken support for the Republic dangerous for Labor, which had a powerful Catholic wing.<sup>40</sup>

The Catholic Church maintained its hostility towards the Republicans and continued to promote Franco as the saviour from communist rule and the destruction of the Church. From the outset, it warned against Catholics supporting the SRC or contributing to its appeals.<sup>41</sup> The Church created its own fund for Spain, but the money raised (£7000 by March 1937) went to help restore desecrated church buildings.<sup>42</sup> Even after the bombing of the market town of Guernica in northern Spain by German bombers in 1938, the Church denied the slaughter had occurred and claimed it was a communist lie.<sup>43</sup>

Curtin therefore steered the ALP towards neutrality, but the labour movement was never united on the issue.<sup>44</sup> Many left-leaning Catholics, driven by class-consciousness rather than their religious faith, ignored the church's sermons and supported the Republican side. Disputes arose in union branch after union branch on support for Spain's Republic, with or without the presence of Catholics at the meetings.<sup>45</sup> Labor's hierarchy struggled to maintain control. Dissent in Western Australia led the local party to enforce policy by dissolving a newly-formed Youth League in 1936, when a group of its members joined with communists in support of the Spanish Republic.<sup>46</sup> However, workers' groups in Fremantle contributed to the Spanish Relief Fund and the SRC's efforts to raise awareness of events in Spain.<sup>47</sup>

The Movement Against War and Fascism (MAWF) was one of the main drivers for Spanish Relief, and an early manifestation of a mobilising structure in the campaign against war and

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<sup>40</sup> Keene, *The Last Mile*, 59-61.

<sup>41</sup> "Spanish Relief Committee Attacked", *The Workers Star*, April 16<sup>th</sup>, 1937, 4.

<sup>42</sup> Inglis, *Australians in the Spanish Civil War*, 45.

<sup>43</sup> Keene, *The Last Mile*, 59.

<sup>44</sup> Keene, *The Last Mile*, 59-61.

<sup>45</sup> Inglis, *Australians in the Spanish Civil War*, 51.

<sup>46</sup> Inglis, *Australians in the Spanish Civil War*, 38.

<sup>47</sup> Inglis, *Australians in the Spanish Civil War*, 50.

fascism. It was established in Western Australia in November 1935, when a Peace Congress in Perth adopted a CPA motion to establish a "People's Movement Against War and Fascism".<sup>48</sup> The Congress had representatives from across the community, including from the Methodist Church, YMCA, UWA Guild of Undergraduates, WA Council Against War, Fremantle Labor Women, Lumpers Union, Water Supply Union and Boilermakers.<sup>49</sup> The ALP would later ban joint membership of the MAWF and the Labor Party, leading the *Workers Star* to condemn the ALP executive for being out of touch with rank-and-file unionists and district branches, like that in Fremantle, which opposed the ban.<sup>50</sup>

Western Australia's Council for Spanish Relief merged with the early SRC, and its members included prominent Protestant churchmen and leading figures such as Professor Walter Murdoch from the University of Western Australia, the State Librarian, Dr Battye, and the Anglican Dean of Perth. These men were at the forefront of the launch of the SRC appeal for funds to aid Spanish refugees in 1937.<sup>51</sup> This broad alliance was in keeping with the CPA's position of developing a united front of communists, socialists and liberals to fight fascism; a position adopted at the Comintern's Seventh Congress in 1935.<sup>52</sup>

Fremantle's first public investment in its opposition to Spain's civil war was the send-off it provided to four nurses who travelled to Spain to provide medical support for the Republicans. All such welcomes and farewells, and there were several, were personal, political and theatrical; prime examples of protest cycle, as they generated publicity and attracted new supporters. The nurses included Mae McFarlane, who was originally from Mount Lawley in Perth. The four had been recruited from the State Hospital in Liddicombe, New South Wales and all were politically active in the SRC if not the CPA itself. They were welcomed and farewelled as the *Oronsay* docked in Fremantle on its way from Sydney to Europe at the end of October 1936. The local SRC donated thirty pounds and medical equipment to the unit the nurses would work in.<sup>53</sup>

Throughout 1937, a protest cycle was developed and maintained in Fremantle with a series of meetings and events. In April, the CPA organised meetings, including one in Fremantle, to allow J.B. King to report on his visit to the Soviet Union and discuss the construction of the communist state. These meetings connected to events in Spain by holding collections for the SRC.<sup>54</sup> In May, three New Zealand nurses were welcomed as they sailed through Fremantle on

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<sup>48</sup> "League Sanctions Support". *The Red Star*, November 15<sup>th</sup> 1935, 1.

<sup>49</sup> "League Sanctions Support". *The Red Star*, November 15<sup>th</sup> 1935, 1.

<sup>50</sup> "Anti-War Movement Ban". *The Workers Star*, January 1<sup>st</sup> 1937, 2.

<sup>51</sup> "Assistance to Refugees". *The West Australian*, April 5<sup>th</sup> 1937, 13.

<sup>52</sup> Inglis, *Australians in the Spanish Civil War*, 49, 69.

<sup>53</sup> "Australian Nurses to Risk Lives in Spain 'For Freedom!' " *Daily News*, November 2<sup>nd</sup> 1936, 1.

<sup>54</sup> "J.B. King's Itinerary". *The Workers Star*, April 9<sup>th</sup> 1937, 2.

their way to Spain.<sup>55</sup> In September, Sister Mary Lawson, the lead nurse from the group of four sent to Spain, returned to Fremantle and spoke at a public reception at the Town Hall organised by the SRC.<sup>56</sup> She also addressed the Lumpers Union members at the local pick-up point, where she declared the war as no longer a civil war, but a fight against international fascism.<sup>57</sup> At another Town Hall meeting, Ron Hurd, a returned and wounded International Brigade volunteer and CPA member, spoke to the crowd about the fight against fascism. Despite his injuries he went on a speaking tour of the state.<sup>58</sup> In early 1938, to maintain the profile, attract new supporters in the community and boost fundraising efforts, the SRC organised a "Spanish Week", including a fund-raising picnic at Fremantle's South Beach on the Sunday with a special train organised for the event. The *West Australian* reported public support for the day and a "considerable sum of money raised".<sup>59</sup> In the same week the Women's Movement Against War and Fascism called for a labour-movement protest at Fremantle docks to "refuse to welcome or countenance any public reception" for a visiting Italian naval ship.<sup>60</sup>

Meanwhile, Labor's stance towards the SRC remained lukewarm and divided. The party's Claremont branch was condemned by the state party leadership for supporting a letter from the SRC asking for a donation,<sup>61</sup> whilst the Young Labor League refused to send a delegate to the SRC and instead requested that the SRC attend their meeting before considering any association with them.

This latter episode was reported with a degree of pride in Labor's paper, the *Westralian Worker*.<sup>62</sup>

The Left Book Club (LBC) emerged in WA in April 1938, further boosting the support for Spain by providing another mobilising structure that facilitated access to left-wing reading material. Originating in England in 1936, the club, with the publishing company, Penguin Books, changed the way people purchased and read books.<sup>63</sup> Western Australia boasted the first club, formed after a meeting at the Equity Hall in Perth. At its peak the LBC had four thousand, five hundred members across Australia.<sup>64</sup> By 1939, it also had a bookshop in Perth, and fifteen discussion groups across the state, including one in Fremantle.<sup>65</sup> It clearly valued its

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<sup>55</sup> "Nurses for Spain". *The Workers Star*, May 28<sup>th</sup> 1937, 3.

<sup>56</sup> "Australian Nurse From Spain". *The Daily News*, September 27<sup>th</sup> 1937, 7.

<sup>57</sup> Inglis, *Australians in the Spanish Civil War*, 77-78.

<sup>58</sup> "Australian from Spain". *The Daily News*, November 10<sup>th</sup>, 1937, 4.

<sup>59</sup> "Spanish Relief". *The West Australian*, February 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1938, 6.

<sup>60</sup> "Italian Warship due at Fremantle". *Sunday Times*, Feb 27 1938, 1

<sup>61</sup> "A.L.P. Right-Wingers Aid Franco". *The Workers Star*, April 1<sup>st</sup>, 1938, 6.

<sup>62</sup> "Young Labor League." *Westralian Worker*, May 6<sup>th</sup> 1938, 3.

<sup>63</sup> John Arnold, "The Left Book Club in Australia: Achieving Reform and Change through Reading and It's Attempted Suppression." *Journal of Australian Studies* 25, no. 69 (2001): 103. DOI: 10.1080/14443050109387691.

<sup>64</sup> "Left Book Club Formed". *The Daily News*, April 21<sup>st</sup> 1938, 2.

<sup>65</sup> Arnold, *Left Book Club*, 104.



internationalist links. At an international rally of the club in London's Albert Hall in 1939, a telegram from the "Westralian Left-Bookers" was read out to the crowd.<sup>66</sup> With close ties to the CPA, the club and its active members came under increasing surveillance by Australian authorities. In Perth, raids on homes and premises became known amongst left circles as "the blitz", as the government attempted to restrict opportunity for left-wing politics. Many of those raided were communists active in the LBC.<sup>67</sup>

In May 1938, the Fremantle branch of the LBC clashed with the Fremantle City Council over its refusal to allow the screening of the film "The Defence of Madrid". Councillor Evans moved the request to use the hall be refused, whilst Councillor Wilson said the film should be banned from the venue because it was political. The motion was carried, unanimously, by the chamber.<sup>68</sup> When the Lumpers Union were informed of this decision by the LBC at the local waterfront pick-up point, members decided to protest.<sup>69</sup> At a "stormy meeting" the councillors insisted their decision was based on the request to use the venue free, rather than on political grounds. The meeting was reported as "ending in uproar".<sup>70</sup>

The annual May Day rally, an ongoing example in Perth radicals' contentious repertoire, that year attracted a large crowd of five hundred at the Perth Esplanade to hear the Oreski Band and SRC speakers, including Katharine Susannah Prichard and Phil Luetich, a Yugoslav communist, discuss Spain and the fight against fascism.<sup>71</sup> The following month Prichard opened her new play: "Women of Spain", produced by the Workers Arts Guild, Perth's radical alternative to the stuffy, drawing-room dramas and farces produced at mainstream theatres. This event also was also another fundraiser for the SRC.<sup>72</sup> The month also heralded a shift towards framing more political demands related to Spain's war, rather than a focus on raising funds and solidarity. The SRC called for a lift of the arms embargo to the Spanish Government and a trade union rally was arranged for July.<sup>73</sup> At the same time, the local Fremantle Branch of the Amalgamated Engineering Union (AEU) passed a resolution also calling for a union conference, to discuss concerns about apparent preparations for war by the Lyons government.<sup>74</sup>

In July, Fremantle established its own SRC, with delegates from Labor's Fremantle branch, the Fremantle Youth Labor League, and branches of various unions in the town, including the

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<sup>66</sup> Arnold, *Left Book Club*, 106.

<sup>67</sup> Arnold, *Left Book Club*, 106-107.

<sup>68</sup> "Defence of Madrid". *The West Australian*, May 24<sup>th</sup> 1938, 15.

<sup>69</sup> "Lumpers Addressed on Alleged Film Ban". *The Daily News*, May 28<sup>th</sup> 1938, 13.

<sup>70</sup> "Town Hall Ban". *The West Australian*, 31<sup>st</sup> May 1938, 17.

<sup>71</sup> "Communist Party Record Celebration". *The Workers Star*, May 6<sup>th</sup> 1938, 1.

<sup>72</sup> "Theatre". *The Workers Star*, June 10<sup>th</sup> 1938, 4.

<sup>73</sup> "Spanish Relief Committee". *The West Australian*, June 4<sup>th</sup> 1938, 19.

<sup>74</sup> "Trade Union." *The Workers Star*. June 17<sup>th</sup> 1938, 2.

Dockers, Lumpers, Seamen, Carpenters and Water Workers.<sup>75</sup> The AWU also sent a delegate, but only, according to the *Workers Star*, after a delay “once again” in getting a quorum.<sup>76</sup> At a meeting at the Fremantle Town Hall, Ann Caton, from the English National Joint Committee of Spanish Relief, spoke to the local audience about her experiences of Spain and the horrors of the war. The meeting carried the following resolution:

The meeting of citizens of Fremantle expresses its sympathy and solidarity with the Spanish people in their fight against fascism and foreign intervention by Italy and Germany. We further call upon our federal member (Mr. J. Curtin) to move in the national parliament a demand for the government of Spain to have the right to purchase munitions for the defence of its people and their freedom.<sup>77</sup>

At the meeting, G. Collins of the Fremantle Lumpers Union, was given a “storm of applause” in recognition of the Lumpers Union black-banning scrap iron cargoes to Japan. Days later, on July 27, Ann Caton spoke again in Fremantle, this time at a trade union rally in the Fremantle Trades Hall building organised by the SRC and chaired by John Tonkin, state Labor member for North East Fremantle in the Legislative Assembly. Despite the official non-intervention position, local Labor Party members and officials were openly supporting the SRC and the fight against Fascism in Spain. At another meeting in early August, the Fremantle District ALP agreed that the SRC could continue to use the Trades Hall for its meetings.<sup>78</sup> Labor Party activists were ignoring the leadership, revealing how cohesive this issue had become amongst Fremantle’s labour movement and wider community.

Pressure increased, internally and externally, for Labor to amend its position on Spain. At a similar meeting to the Fremantle trade union rally, held at the Perth Town Hall in the same week, the Youth Labor League secretary, Mr H. Graham, reportedly “tore the non-intervention policy to shreds”.<sup>79</sup> Meanwhile, back in Fremantle at the Trades Hall, Mr O. Cook, from the Lumpers Union, addressed the meeting and also called for an end to the arms embargo.<sup>80</sup>

The Fremantle SRC maintained its energetic protest cycle to publicise Spain’s plight and in early September organised screenings of the pro-Republican films “*They Shall Not Pass*” and “*News From Spain*” at the Beacon Theatre on Hampton Road.<sup>81</sup> Another screening took place a week later, with the gathering chaired this time by Mr W. Wauhopp, president of the local ALP. Mr

<sup>75</sup> “Fremantle Workers Organise Spanish Aid”. *The Workers Star*, July 22<sup>nd</sup> 1938, 1.

<sup>76</sup> “Fremantle A.W.U.”. *The Workers Star*, August 12<sup>th</sup> 1938, 2.

<sup>77</sup> “Spanish Refugees”. *The West Australian*, July 26<sup>th</sup> 1938, 19.

<sup>78</sup> “Fremantle News and Views”. *Westralian Worker*, August 5<sup>th</sup> 1938, 3.

<sup>79</sup> “W.A. People Support Spain”. *The Workers Star*, August 5<sup>th</sup> 1938, 1.

<sup>80</sup> “Mass Trade Union Rallies to Aid Spain”. *The Workers Star*, August 5<sup>th</sup> 1938, 6.

<sup>81</sup> “Spanish films to be shown in suburbs”. *The Workers Star*, September 9<sup>th</sup> 1938, 1

McKercher, the Beacon Theatre manager, was cheered by the audience for allowing free use of the facility.<sup>82</sup> The Fremantle ALP also met and cooperated with the local LBC members in screening the film based on John Reed's famous book about the Russian October revolution: "*Ten Days That Shook the World*". Despite this consideration and without intended irony, the same meeting announced and endorsed the expulsion of F.K. Green, a delegate to the ALP State Executive, because he had been found to be a member of the CPA.<sup>83</sup>

In 1939, the war in Spain was shifting towards a conclusion, and not in favour of the Republic. In November, the International Brigades were disbanded and its Australian members began returning home. Earlier, on January 18, two of the original nurses to depart for Spain, Mae McFarlane and Una Wilson, were welcomed back at Fremantle waterside by a crowd that included SRC members and waterside trade unionists.<sup>84</sup> A large banner read: "Heroines of Democracy – Two Years in Spain for Humanity and Freedom Against Fascist Barbarism". In February, the two nurses completed their farewell tour of Western Australia with a rally at Fremantle's Beacon Theatre. Wauhop told the audience that: "The whole of the ALP should be behind the Spanish Government".<sup>85</sup> In January, the SRC called on Joe Lyons to grant credit to the Spanish Republic to purchase Australian wheat, thus giving relief to Australian farmers as well as the Spanish republic, but Lyons refused to budge on the non-intervention policy.<sup>86</sup> In the same month, Lloyd Edmonds, one of the Spanish Volunteer Brigaders, spent ten days in Fremantle cared for by SRC supporters after his arrival home to Australia.<sup>87</sup> His letters from Spain were later published, providing a firsthand account of the war.<sup>88</sup>

Unfortunately, the ongoing non-intervention of western powers, including Australia, contributed to the defeat of the Republican Government by the Nationalist Forces. The SRC continued to raise funds, now for refugees fleeing over the French border. However, the ALP and Australian Congress of Trade Unions (ACTU), who feared the dilution of the job market and competition for jobs, refused to support calls to allow the refugees to come to Australia.<sup>89</sup> To the very end, Curtin distanced Labor from Spain's war.

In a summary report to the press, P.T. Thorne, Australian secretary of the SRC, reported that, during the conflict, of the 59 Australian volunteers, including 8 non-combatants, 28 had

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<sup>82</sup> "Successful Aid Spain Rally in Fremantle". *The Workers Star*, September 16<sup>th</sup> 1938, 14.

<sup>83</sup> "Fremantle News and Views". *Westralian Worker*. 16<sup>th</sup> September 1938, 3.

<sup>84</sup> "Nurses from Spain". *The West Australian*, January 18<sup>th</sup> 1939, 23.

<sup>85</sup> "Aussie Nurses for Spain Wind-Up Successful W.A. Tour". *The Workers Star*, February 17<sup>th</sup> 1939, 1.

<sup>86</sup> "Lyons Refuses Aid for Spain". *The Workers Star*, January 20<sup>th</sup> 1939, 1.

<sup>87</sup> Inglis, *Letters From Spain*, 198.

<sup>88</sup> Inglis, *Letters From Spain*.

<sup>89</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, February 10<sup>th</sup> 1939, in Keene, 67.

been killed in Spain.<sup>90</sup> Nationally, the SRC had also raised fourteen thousand pounds for the purchase of food, medical supplies and ambulances to aid Spanish victims of the war.<sup>91</sup> In September, as World War Two commenced, the SRC discontinued its activity.<sup>92</sup>

This internationalist campaign, this anti-fascist movement, with its high-profile presence in Fremantle, built on the earlier class-conscious industrial militancy shown during the Depression years and after. Although some support for fascism in Fremantle was evident, particularly in displays of Italian nationalism amongst Italian migrants, it did not gain a significant foothold. This can be explained by several factors. Firstly, the Italian community itself was divided on the issue of support for Mussolini, with some supporting socialist ideas. The Italian Club provided a platform for this debate and diversity of opinion, through its secretary, Biago Seminara, who had cool relations with officials from the Italian consulate. Despite experiencing daily prejudice in their lives, there is no evidence of provocative or aggressive fascist action by this community. Some Italian fishermen raised gold, silver and money towards Mussolini's Abyssinian campaign, but this support created heated debate within the Italian community, many of whom opposed Mussolini or wanted nothing to do with Italian politics.

It is likely that the presence of class-conscious union activism, particularly among the Lumpers, but also in the Fremantle District Council of the ALP, cut across any local support for fascism, both by Italians and white Australians. The Lumpers had many times before supported left wing causes unrelated to their own industrial struggles for better pay and conditions. From their support for other workers, including the unemployed, to their support for Spain's Republic, they provided a strong working-class basis for local community anti-fascist solidarity. This weakened any attempt to show or build fascist support in Fremantle.

Despite Labor's hands-off position on Spain, and the Catholic Church's opposition to support for Spain's Republic, labour movement activists in Fremantle mobilised a large section of the Fremantle community to support a distant cause; support that reflected a sophisticated understanding of the significance of the result, and support which exemplified all the stages set out in the PPT. The failure of the Republicans in the Spanish Civil War realised the movement's greatest fear—another world war, this time against an alliance of fascist forces, with another Australian generation called to arms. This brought an end to a decade of turbulent industrial and political activism in Fremantle, which saw both successes and failures. Returning to the argument that the 1930s was a decade of consensus politics, the evidence from Fremantle certainly shows that it wasn't.

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<sup>90</sup> The number of Australian volunteers is now generally considered to be 69.

<sup>91</sup> "Australians Killed". *The West Australian*, February 8<sup>th</sup> 1939, 21.

<sup>92</sup> "Relief Committee Closes Down". *The Daily News*, September 23<sup>rd</sup> 1939, 12.

## Conclusions

### ACTIVISM IN 1930S FREMANTLE

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A stated aim of my thesis was to assess the degree of activism within the Fremantle community in one of the most turbulent decades in its history. Clear gaps exist in the record about the response of the city to the dual challenges of the Great Depression and the rise of fascism in the 1930s. Given the class conflict that existed elsewhere in Australia and in western countries in general, it was of interest to me to examine Fremantle's experience. Overall, the evidence shows that Fremantle, through existing community organisations in the trade union branches, ALP District Council, the Trades Hall, Communist Party, and unemployed organising committees, mobilised local workers and the unemployed to fight for fairer conditions and to protect existing ones. Anti-fascists in Fremantle also mobilised through existing ethnic communities and newly created community bodies such as the Spanish Relief Committee and the Left Book Club, to campaign against the rise of fascism, in a show of solidarity with radical Fremantle workers and in the attempt to prevent another war.

This is not the first research to be undertaken on Fremantle's inter-war history, as was made evident in my literature review. Significantly, though, it is the first study of the period in which a systematic and theoretical approach has been offered. Accordingly, it has also been my aim to consider whether Political Process Theory (PPT) is an appropriate framework to consider the social history—and particularly that of community activism—in 1930s Fremantle. PPT, as was discussed in the introductory chapter, was a research method devised in the 1970s and 1980s to explain the causal factors of social-movement activism. Scholars Charles Tilly, Doug McAdam, and Neal Caren demonstrated through PPT that successful social movements depend on the presence of interest, opportunity and organisation. Five stages within the model were identified as political opportunity, the mobilisation of new and/or existing organisations, the articulation of demands and solutions, the organisation of protest activity, and, finally, action and agitation.

#### *Industrial activism*

The economic and ideological conditions of 1930s Fremantle clearly presented *political opportunity* for community activism. Dire economic necessity drove demands for fair pay, work, and for adequate welfare support from government. The draconian conditions created by the Premiers Plan—which cut wages and public spending, and increased unemployment as demand

for goods collapsed—fuelled political opportunities as workers questioned and challenged the Depression-era austerity measures. The Treasury March and subsequent riot, involving some of Fremantle’s unemployed workers, and the Fremantle Wool Stores dispute over pay cuts are examples of this political opportunity played out, as workers questioned the legitimacy of the cuts and moved to take action.

Conversely, it could be argued that repressive measures by the state or others also curtailed activism, thereby reducing opportunity. The use of police to monitor and harass activists, and the creation of rural work camps to remove the unemployed from the metropolitan area, reduced the opportunity of the unemployed to mobilise within their own communities. However, despite their isolation, the camps created a breeding ground for militancy, as anger grew at the men’s situation.

Existing and new mobilising structures successfully organised workers and others in their activism during this time. These included the local council and its unemployment support committees, the ALP and CPA fraternal organisations, trade union branches and the Trades Hall building. The Lumpers Union branch was a particularly dynamic mobilising structure in Fremantle, activating not only its own membership, but supporting other local and international causes. Its active membership was radical and militant, providing strength to other workers in dispute, such as the Wool Stores and Mills and Ware strikers. The Trades Hall building in Fremantle was also a key structure in mobilising local support for the unemployed and strike action by workers.

Conservative structures, such as local church soup kitchens and the Ugly Men’s Association also played their part in supporting the poor, such as in local church soup kitchens and the Ugly Men’s Association charity work. These organisations fit the consensus view—that the community joined together against hardship. In this context, hostels for single, unemployed men and relief-work projects played a valuable role in supporting individuals and families at a very tough time. They also created opportunities to share grievances and provide mutual support, helping to build resilience in Fremantle to endure or alleviate the worst of the conditions. Nevertheless, more militant organisation and action was required to defend established work conditions or fight for fairer ones and the unemployed split from the council and, in, part from the ALP, as communists and other radicals tried to organise the unemployed.

Such mobilising structures and the sharing of ideas that occurred within them, framed demands, which were campaigned for through deputations, public meetings, rallies, workplace discussions and letter writing to the press. The Militant Minority Movement was particularly active in Fremantle in framing demands for the unemployed at local public meetings, demands that saw support as a right, not charity. In this view, the unemployed were seen as the victims of the capitalist crisis. The unemployed formed their own demands within their own committee, for

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work and fair pay, and the failure to have these demands met, and the conditions they faced, ensured conflict on relief work projects in the city, as they built unemployed community.

Once problems and solutions are framed, PPT suggests that the next step in community activism is usually *the protest cycle*: the organisation of activity that generates publicity, solidarity and momentum, and which may itself attract new members. Marches and rallies became the most common activity by the unemployed to highlight their cause and add supporters. In the cases of the Treasury Riot and Frankland River demonstration these led to repressive tactics by police. Protest cycles in 1930s Fremantle were contested and fragmented, usually as a result of political or ideological friction. Both the ALP and Fremantle Council attempted to prevent radical voices, notably those of communists, from representing the unemployed. As a result, they attempted to exclude radical or communist representation from unemployment relief work where possible, which in turn reduced political opportunity for socialist solutions and may have curtailed militancy.

The final stage of community activism identified by PPT is that of contentious repertoires, being such action as strikes, demonstrations, community defiance and self-defence. Such actions, in turn, may provoke further repression and remove political opportunities. The Wool Stores strike of 1931 provides the strongest example of activism in Fremantle in the Depression. Not only was the dispute successful in restoring pay rates that had been doubly cut, but it also involved local community solidarity, especially among Fremantle trade unions. The Lumpers Union, an ever-present dynamic force in Fremantle's militant disputes in the 1930s, was highly active in support of the strikers, and was part of a contentious repertoire of action. In their case, it included support for striking workers on the picket line, and preparing to resist scab labour under the protection of the Police Commissioner.

State repression of protest was ubiquitous in the 1930s and included the use of police to harass radicals—especially communists—and break up marches and demonstrations, protests and strikes. Meanwhile, courts were used to fine or imprison activists. Legislation such as the *Transport Workers Act* (often called the Dog Collar Act) was to be used to exclude militant dock workers from employment, while Mitchell's bulk-handling proposal would have smashed the Lumpers Union and the Fremantle economy if it had been implemented. The repression of protest also included sending the unemployed to rural work camps where they would be isolated from city unrest. Solidarity was evident in Fremantle, due in part to the presence of local men at the rural camps and the strong, grass roots labour movement network. All of these repressive measures attempted to restrict the political opportunity of workers to organise, despite sharpening class tensions.

Political opportunity for workers was also weakened by a conservative ALP leadership and the dominance of right-wing trade unions; especially the powerful AWU. This combined party structure prevented and undermined activism, including that of the unemployed. This was most cynically demonstrated in the disputes at the southwest work camps at Harvey and Frankland River where, despite the determination of unemployed relief workers to fight for better pay and conditions, or for the formation of their own union, they were undermined by Labor Party and AWU self-interest.

#### *Anti-fascist activism*

Fremantle also displayed an active internationalism in support of the Spanish Republic during the Spanish Civil War. The local Spanish Relief Committee developed from the mobilising structures that already existed in the community, which debated this political issue—the more politicised trade union branches like the Lumpers, ALP district branches, ethnic community activists, Communist Party activists, as well as left-leaning intellectual circles associated with the universities, arts and professions. The political opportunity to raise these issues arose as concern grew about the growth of fascism in Europe, and support for it in Western Australia by parts of the Italian community, the Roman Catholic Church and conservative elements in Australia. The fear of another world war propelled this movement.

The Italian community in Fremantle had been a cohesive one, by virtue of their shared origins in Sicily and the need for mutual support in the face of local prejudice. Their mobilising structures—the fishing industry, market gardens and social clubs—bonded them in shared experience and mutual dependence, and the community also lived closely together in several streets in Fremantle. The Italian consul added to these structures, funding overtly political clubs to foster conservative nationalism and promote fascism. This strategy was only partially successful however. Whilst fascism mobilised and brought together some of the community, and generated some support for Mussolini, many in the Italian community were opposed. Fascism therefore divided the community politically and weakened its cohesiveness. Whilst there were displays of Italian nationalism and fascism on ceremonial occasions, like the welcoming of Italian naval vessels at the port, this appears to have been tolerated by the local labour movement in the early part of the decade, though not later. The overt propaganda by the Italian Consulate did not create a visible fascist presence in Fremantle.

There were also no displays of racial violence in Fremantle, as was the case in Kalgoorlie. Again, the active labour structures prevented reactionary racist elements in Fremantle's Anglo-Celtic community from organising. The left-leaning Yugoslav community contributed to this anti-fascism, being a small, but highly visible presence at rallies and public meetings. Attempts to



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mobilise reactionary white workers behind the National Socialist Party of Western Australia failed. The development of the Spanish conflict also brought anti-fascist activism to the fore in Fremantle, which had the effect of suppressing local fascist sympathies.

The framing of ideas and demands regarding Spain were formed in the local pre-existing organisations such as the trade union branches and Trades Hall meetings but were brought together in a cohesive campaign by the creation of the SRC in Perth and especially by the local Branch in Fremantle, which organised many high profile events to publicise the cause and recruit supporters. As well as public meetings and film shows about Spain during the Spanish conflict, the Spanish Relief Committee also organised a large picnic at South Beach in order to build support and raise funds from amongst the broader local community. This protest cycle also included farewells or welcomes home for volunteers who had travelled through the port to fight fascism or provide medical support. These port visits were a powerful reminder of what was at stake in Europe.

The Catholic Church was also an important institution Fremantle, but not all Catholics supported its position on Spain and class sympathies often displaced religious loyalty. In the Labor Party, the non-intervention policy was ignored by many party members, who became active in the Fremantle anti-fascist movement in support of Spain's Republic. This activism had solid foundations in the trade union movement, particularly the radical Lumpers Union, and among a small number of District Labor Party members and communists. This group was able to work together to mobilise larger sections of the Fremantle community into an anti-fascist community, to support the republican cause and more generally the cause of anti-fascism.

### *Consensus or conflict*

A third aim of the thesis was to test the accuracy of the narrative of consensus politics in this period developed by the historians Geoffrey Bolton and Frank Crowley. Whilst Bolton acknowledged the protest and industrial disputes in the early 1930s, particularly the Treasury Riot and rural work camp disputes, his view was that these were out of character for Western Australians, who were not inclined to militancy or trade union action. He also stressed the role of the outsider in provoking militancy, a narrative that was ever-present in police and press reporting at the time.

Bolton portrayed an avuncular image of Premier James Mitchell, who tried his best to alleviate the worst of the suffering, helpless in the face of such a severe economic depression. He also minimised the repressive actions taken by Mitchell's government to prevent radical opposition to its policies and programmes. As we have seen, these actions included the use of police to harass, surveil, arrest and charge activists, and to break strikes. They also included

sending unemployed workers to harsh, rural work camps and imposing strict measures to manage them, measures which were in many ways, continued by the Collier Labor government that was elected in 1933, though Labor closed the worst camps. The severe economic conditions and the response of Fremantle's employed and unemployed workers ruptured the status quo, as they found their conditions unacceptable and were forced into action. What we see, therefore, in 1930s Fremantle, is neither a political or social consensus, but a mostly working-class community, sometimes united, sometimes divided, acutely aware of its situation and the need to fight back.

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