

The Conference re-endorsed the earlier demands regarding relief. The major discussion and concern of conference was the organisational methods and framework to be used, both in setting up job committees and coordinating councils, and in conducting strikes and agitations. These organisational methods were lengthily set out in the pamphlet How We Fight, which was sold for twopence and evidently had a wide distribution. The preamble noted:

"Conference was of particular importance in that it enabled delegates to see in retrospect the work that had been done since the inception of the unemployed and relief workers' movement, and to get some idea of their successes and of their failures."

The organisational programme aimed

"to criticise the grave errors into which the movement has at many times fallen, and to advance proposals for their avoidance in the future. There have been negligence and irresponsibility, and the united front has often been jeopardised by sectarianism, lack of cohesion and bureaucracy."

This programme, therefore, seeks to give guidance and direction to those elected representatives and members of committees who have had little or no experience in ... agitational and organisational work."272

This pamphlet is too lengthy and too closeknit for excerpts to be made from it; reference should be made to it in its entirety. The methods set down for building job committees and locals stressed the need for non-sectarianism, openness and the democratic election of representatives. The structure of the State Council's

organisation was still pyramidal. As to the agitation methods, it was emphasised that no strike should be called until the ground had been carefully prepared by means of bulletins and meetings, and that a minority of workers should not decide to strike; wide and representative strike committees (including sub-committees to organise publicity, relief, educational and social activities) should be elected at the beginning of the strike; every attempt should be made to draw in the wives and families of the strikers. The necessity of providing relief and information (through strike bulletins and frequent meetings at local jobs that were still working), and of widening the strike to include both more jobs and more demands were particularly stressed. Again it was declared that demands should be concrete and comprehensible. All these matters were outlined with great clarity, and without recourse to Communist jargon.

The State Council organisation was already much less sectarian in its attitudes to A.L.P. members or moderates than the U.W.M. had been; it became more open as it became increasingly linked with the Labor Council and the union movement. However, the State Council leaders viciously fought against the unemployed organisation founded by the Sylvester group.

Any adequate study of this quarrel would necessitate a detailed account of the beginnings of Trotskyism in Australia; I am here only concerned with the actual organisation of the Unemployed and Relief Workers' Union, as the organisation connected

with Sylvester and the Workers' Party was called. It is, however, necessary to backtrack briefly to the split.

We have seen that the dissension between Sylvester and certain other Party members and the C.P.A. leaders began as early as 1931, and that the conflict revolved around opposing views on both the aim and role of the Communist Party, and its organisation. The Left Oppositionists supported Trotsky's belief in the necessity of a spreading, world-wide revolution, and opposed the Stalinist policy that Communist Parties should now moderate their revolutionary vanguard role, and ally with social democratic organisations to protect Soviet Communism against war. In other words, it was the conflict between Permanent Revolution and Socialism In One Country.²⁷³ The Left Oppositionists

273. There were, of course, other factors involved, not least of which was personal animosity. Also, the Left Oppositionists were not, at this stage, Trotskyists pure and simple, but derived their beliefs from a number of radical traditions, including anarchism and syndicalism. They did not oppose the C.P.A. because of their blind adherence to Trotsky; rather it would seem, they came to support Trotskyism because they had themselves arrived at a similar theoretical position, based on their analysis of errors in the Comintern and the C.P.A. Wyner told me that Trotskyism took a long time to filter through to Australia; it does seem that the full implications of the split between Trotsky and Stalin did not reach Australian Communists till around this time. It is quite probable that some Left Oppositionists did not become Trotskyists until after they had left, or been expelled from, the Party - then, being thrust into exile themselves, they felt great empathy with the leader in exile. The Workers' Party, however, was avowedly Trotskyist.

also opposed the Stalinist policy of Democratic Centralism, whereby power was vested in a small ruling clique in the Party, and free discussion and criticism were barred. The Left Oppositionists declared themselves "against dictation from above."²⁷⁴

The disagreement over the organisation of the 1932 Questionnaire Agitation in Glebe had brought dissension to a head, and the conflict was furthered by a fight over the organisation of mass support and protest around Nobby Eatock's court case and imprisonment.²⁷⁵

Finally, in March 1933, Sylvester was publicly denounced as an enemy of the working class and was soon expelled. He was later accused of disruption, factionalism, conspiring with renegades, hindering the revolution, organisational anarchy, leftist political

274. The Tocsin, 28/4/33. Albert Robbie, when speaking to me of the split, spoke bitterly of the C.P.A. leaders and their desire for power, comparing their thrust towards domination of the Party with the megalomaniacal, increasingly-insatiable power-hunger of Macbeth.

275. c.f. The Workers' Party (Left Opposition) of Australia, op. cit.; The Tocsin, 3/6/33. Sylvester and others believed that the I.L.D. was not doing enough to organise protest, so formed the 'Eatock Defence Committee'; the I.L.D. claimed that it was the only body which could organise Eatock's defence. The I.L.D. did in fact do little for Eatock; it is possible that, as the Eatocks were Oppositionists, the C.P.A. leaders preferred to have a martyr in gaol than a dissident Party member free. Mrs. Eatock worked with Sylvester in the Eatock Defence Committee.

views, being part of the anarcho-syndicalist group of Moxon, Marshall and other "disruptive provocateurs", and being a police spy.²⁷⁶

Some other oppositionists were expelled at around this time, and some Party members left out of solidarity with Sylvester, or objection to the C.P.A. leaders' actions. These expelled or disillusioned ex-Communists quickly formed the Workers' Party.

After his expulsion, Sylvester continued to run the Balmain U.W.M., despite the Communist Party's organisation of an opposition group in Balmain. Obviously his former high position in the U.W.M. had enabled him to keep up some links with the unemployed, especially in his own area.

There were a number of dedicated and practised radicals in the early Trotskyist group who had been involved in Communist unemployed organisation, so it is not surprising that they should decide to mount their own unemployed organisation.

It would seem that they began organising towards their union in mid 1934. I have already noted one Workers' Weekly attack upon the presence of "a few Sylvesterites" at a conference in July.

276. W.W., 24/3/33; 14/4/33, p. 4; 5/5/33, p. 2; 11/8/33, p. 2. When I asked Stan Moran about Sylvester, he made similar denunciations. That Moran and Robbie should remember the split with undiminished enmity shows how strongly both sides had felt about this fight.

Another article in this paper dealing with the July-August conferences (and asserting the primacy of the State Council organisation over any other) stated:

"An alleged 'constitution' for a dole workers' union is being circulated on some jobs. This 'constitution' is repudiated by both the New South Wales Labor Council and the State Council of Unemployed and Relief Workers. The people responsible for this 'constitution' are a clique of would-be disruptors, who have no standing in any unemployed organisation nor in the trade union movement."²⁷⁷

This was clearly a reference to the Sylvester group.

It seems that, although the Sylvester group²⁷⁸ had continued to work among the unemployed and relief workers in 1933 and '34, and had in 1934 decided to extend its base in the unemployed movement, positive moves towards establishing the Unemployed and Relief Workers' Union did not get under way until early 1935.

The Central Organising Committee of this Union decided to concentrate on forming and consolidating the union in a few districts first. In February 1935 it stated that "the Union is catching the imagination of the workers and is building at the rate of 100 per week." It then claimed the support of the Waterloo

277. W.W., 17/8/34, p. 6.

278. It may be slightly misleading to refer thus to 'the Sylvester group', as there were others in it who took leading roles as well as Sylvester; indeed, one of the main tenets of this group was that there should be no semi-dictatorial leaders or personality cults. However, it would also be misleading to refer to this group as 'the Trotskyists', or 'The Workers' Party', as it is certain that not all the organisers of the new Union were either Trotskyists or members of the W.P.A.

Unemployed League; 45 members were enrolled at the first Daceyville meeting and 200 at the first North Sydney meeting.²⁷⁹

By about April it had over 600 enrolled members, and the union had spread to Balmain, Lane Cove and Five Dock as well.²⁸⁰ By September the Balmain branch had over 200 members,²⁸¹ and by October over 300. There were then more branches in at least Marrickville and Leichhardt.²⁸²

Such figures sound negligible compared with the 60,000 odd claimed by the State Council. The Unemployed and Relief Workers' Union was indeed a very much smaller organisation, in terms of geographical as well as numerical influence. (It would seem that it had no branches outside the metropolitan area.) However, two points should be made about its reported support. Firstly, the sources relating to this Union are minute compared to the amount of evidence - press reports and pamphlets - dealing with the State Council network. As the Communist Party opposed it there is no account of it in the Party's press, and only five issues of the paper of the Balmain branch of the union remain. These concentrate mainly on Balmain affairs, and there are no total membership figures given after April. Secondly, the Union figures given are

279. The Tocsin, 14/2/35, pp. 1, 2.

280. Redlight!, undated copy (about April).

281. Redlight!, 16/9/35.

282. Redlight!, 3/10/35.

for formally enrolled, ticket-carrying members, rather than for the number of unemployed represented by the Union. The Union, in other words, did not count supporters as generally as did the State Council. If the same counting methods had been used, the Union would no doubt have been able to claim much more support.

The Union had to face the opposition of the Labor Council as well as of the State Council of Unemployed and Relief Workers. In January 1935 it applied to the Labor Council for affiliation. The Labor Council curtly ruled the letter out of order "as it already recognised an unemployed body". In other words, it declared its support for the State Council of Unemployed and Relief Workers.²⁸³ The Labor Council probably had nothing in particular against the Union but, having just realised the need for a union-unemployed alliance over the threat of relief work in the railways, believed it advisable openly to endorse the largest organisation and, because of Communist hostility to the Union, the Labor Council could not support both. The Union replied:

"Thus we witness once more a 'united front' between Jock Garden and the Communist Party, both of whom are opposed to the Union for the same reason - because they cannot use it for their own political purposes."²⁸⁴

The Workers' Weekly made the same charge against the Union: it warned relief workers "against this clique of six or seven

283. T.L.C.M., 31/1/35; W.W., 8/2/35, p. 5.

284. The Tocsin, 14/2/35.

disgruntled elements who would like to exploit the relief workers for their own anti-working class ends."²⁸⁵

If the allegations sound similar, the aims of both organisations were also very much the same: both fought ultimately for award rates and conditions on relief work and full time work, both called for the immediate increase of relief, and the job committees of the Union fought in the same ways as those connected with the State Council for better immediate conditions for relief workers.

The primary differences in the rationale of the two organisations were connected with the Communist-Trotskyist dispute over Democratic Centralism and the role of the revolutionary vanguard. The leaders of the Union were more 'revolutionary' than the Communist leaders of the State Council, in that they opposed the Communist policy of moderating all unemployed demands to appeal to the lowest common denominator.²⁸⁶

285. W.W., 8/2/35, p. 5.

286. e.g. - The Union opposed the State Council's demand for a 12/- weekly rental allowance as a "Bum's slogan", claiming that it degraded the unemployed by forcing them to put up with charity hand-outs and with "palliatives in the place of regular employment". The Union declared that the unemployed were willing to put up "a real and vigorous fight" for fully paid employment that would enable them to pay their way rather than depending on a token subsistence-level relief, and that what was needed was a clear radical programme and a radical, fighting organisation, rather than small, begging requests. c.f. Redlight!, 16/9/35.

However, these differences were little reflected in the functioning of the two groups: in both, most action was initiated and carried out by the rank and file, and the Unemployed and Relief Workers' Union fully realised the necessity of consolidating support around small, concrete demands.²⁸⁷

The leaders of the new organisation maintained that a regular, permanent union of unemployed and relief workers was needed, rather than an alliance of unemployed councils. They argued that there needed to be a more solid and consistent form of coordination between the job committees and the men off the job than was given by the unemployed councils.²⁸⁸

The State Council seems wilfully to have misunderstood their aims, and attacked the Sylvester group for wanting to form a narrow union of dole workers only (without other unemployed). A Red Leader editorial condemned the

"ridiculous Trotskyist proposal for a registered trade union for unemployed as an anti-working class attempt to narrow the basis of the movement, segregate the unemployed workers from their present craft organisations, and to justify the government plan to apply special relief rates other than existing award rates."²⁸⁹

287. e.g. the Tocsin article, quoted early in this Chapter, declaring that the minority who rightly opposed relief work could not take up an attitude of "splendid isolation", but must go on the jobs and urge for better conditions.

288. c.f. The Tocsin, 22/11/34, p. 2; Redlight!, 16/9/35, p. 2.

289. R.L., 29/5/35, p. 2. c.f. also W.W., 17/8/34, p. 6.

This is indeed a wrong interpretation, for the Sylvester group wanted a wide union. They also stressed that this union should be an integral part of the union movement (as opposed to an unemployed council allied to the unions):

"Without the backing of the organised trade union movement the unemployed can get nothing. And the only way for the unemployed to get that necessary backing is to organise themselves into a UNION as part of the great Labor movement."²⁹⁰

(It is ironical that this organisation which aimed to be a proper union was spurned by the union movement which it aspired to join.)

The State Council had, as well as union backing, more funds, more speakers and organisers, and a much readier access to a wide number of unemployed through the Communist press and the press of affiliated councils. The very fact that it had already built up a wide network of affiliations when the Union began would hamper organisational moves by the Union. Communist speakers actively campaigned against the Unemployed and Relief Workers' Union at job meetings, dragging up all the old, sensational charges against Sylvester. It was probably, however, the Labor Council's exclusion of the Union that was the crucial factor that hampered its growth. Given the weight of its opposition, it is perhaps surprising that the Union was at all viable.

290. Redlight!, 16/9/35, p. 2.

It seems that the Union foundered in about 1936, as more relief workers went back on the dole or into ordinary employment, and when the organisers got regular jobs.²⁹¹

Though it never won support comparable to that of the State Council, it clearly did good organisational work towards improving the conditions of relief workers in the areas in which it was established.

1935 Conference.

The State Council of Unemployed and Relief Workers held its next major conference in late May-early June 1935. By this time the support of the union movement, caused by the threat of relief work in the rail and tram services, was well consolidated.

Early in the year the State Council had mapped out a campaign plan for struggle against the introduction of relief rates into industry and for the introduction of trade union rates and conditions on existing relief jobs, which was endorsed by the Miners' Federation Council. The Labor Council also agreed to the proposals and called for a major conference of unions and State Council

291. Interview with I. Wyner, 1970.

delegates to deal with the issue.²⁹² In early March a Labor Council meeting heard the report of a special committee established to organise against the introduction of relief rates into the railways and tramways. The State Council's report was endorsed, and the material provided was to be the basis of a series of talks on 2KY. Both King and MacKenzie were on this committee. Not surprisingly, Barker, President of the A.R.U., and other delegates from that union pressed for action by all unions in the light of the serious situation facing railway workers.²⁹³ At this time the A.R.U. was holding special meetings of its members to discuss the issue. The Labor Council, the Miners' Federation, the A.R.U. and the State Council of Unemployed and Relief Workers were now vociferously propagandising against the implication of Drake-Brockman's ruling.²⁹⁴

In April there was held the conference mentioned in King's introduction to The Premiers' Plan In Action. This was attended by two delegates from all unions and one delegate from each metropolitan unemployed and relief workers' council affiliated to the State Council.²⁹⁵ King, in his introduction, makes clear

292. W.W., 15/2/35, p. 5. (This call eventuated in the April conference.)

293. W.W., 8/3/35, p. 2.

294. e.g. Ibid., p. 6; The Premiers' Plan In Action was a lengthy piece of publicity devoted to this issue.

295. W.W., 15/3/35, p. 5; c.f. also S.M.H., 12/4/35, p. 11.

the union leaders' fear that all workers could be affected by relief work:

"The matter contained in this pamphlet will leave no doubt in the minds of the workers of the dangers that beset them in the industrial sphere, and which must have the inevitable result of worsening their conditions of levelling all to the standard of living of the 'dole', unless the employed and unemployed are organised in unity of action and purpose to defeat the further application of the Premiers' Plan and to restore the standard of living previously enjoyed."

A Labor Council meeting had resolved that

"this meeting of Labor Council, unemployed and unions concerned, expresses its hostility to, and determines to fight by all means, the introduction of relief schemes within the Railway and Tramway services, and recommends that all workers and unemployed be directed to refuse work under these conditions, and Council to render all moral and financial support within its power to resist its introduction."

The objectives to be aimed at by the union-unemployed council conference were very wide; they were also essentially a reiteration of the platform the State Council had for so long put forward. They were:

"To build up opposition to the further extension of relief work rates and conditions, and to organise mass support for the fight for restoration of award rates and conditions, for the reinstatement of all workers rationed or dismissed (to make way for relief work) to full-time employment at award rates and conditions in their former employment, for an extra day's work for all relief workers with award wages and conditions, for a 100 per cent. increase in food relief, 12/- per week rent allowance to all impoverished tenants, the repeal of the Prevention and Relief of Unemployment Act, and the abolition of the Permissible Income Regulations."

At this conference there was established a combined organising committee, of delegates from the Labor Council, shop committees and the unemployed (undoubtedly, of unemployed connected with the State Council) "to devise means of resisting the introduction of relief work conditions into industry."²⁹⁷ This had the full backing of both the Labor Council and the State Council, and was to function as a permanent committee organising further meetings and propogandising against the relief work system. In May this committee endorsed the State Council's request that Labor Council representatives attend the forthcoming State Council conference. That McAlpine was chosen to represent the Labor Council shows how important the Labor Council judged this conference.²⁹⁸ The Labor Council agreed to the campaign proposals of this committee. These were, initially, to set up unity committees of employed and unemployed in each district; for all trade union secretaries and organisers to arrange union meetings about the issue; to set up publicity sub-committees.²⁹⁹

The State Council by this time had reportedly increased and improved its own mass organisation. Though such claims were common, this is likely in the light of the increased prestige of the Council, caused by the union support - and also its increased

297. S.M.H., 12/4/35, p. 11.

298. R.L., 29/5/35, p. 1.

299. Ibid., 5/6/35, p. 10.

respectability due to support from some churches and some municipal councils.

The Red Leader declared that

"Progress in mass organisation is also emphasised strongly in the increasing activity of the women's committees under the leadership of a special women's organising bureau. Recently a central conference of women was attended by no less than 100 delegates and a series of successful women's conferences in the districts have shown that an increasingly large number of women are playing an active role in the struggles of the unemployed and relief workers." ³⁰⁰

In his speech to conference Payne (elected secretary by a vast majority at the August '34 conference ³⁰¹), reviewed the successes and errors of past organisation, in particular of the Concord West-Homebush Bay and Como struggles. ³⁰² On the whole, his report was favourable, both in terms of support and victories won:

"The general campaign for increased rates of pay to relief workers took the form of public meetings, petitions, deputations to local councils and governing bodies, the winning of support from the Council of Churches and of the sustained exposure through our unemployed press of the misappropriation of the wages tax. While we have not yet achieved all that we set out to attain, these methods had a telling effect. You will recall the chain letters that reached municipal and shire councils, resulting in a deputation from the Local Government Conference in support of the demand.

At the same time a deputation from the Council of Churches approached the government in support of the

300. R.L., 29/5/35, p. 2.

301. R.L., 29/8/35, p. 12.

302. (The Como struggle will be outlined later in the section dealing with protest over payments.)

demand. It was the sustained nature of the campaign carried on by our local and district councils which resulted in the Government being compelled to increase relief workers' wages from £3.8.6 to £3.15.2.³⁰³ Only a sustained campaign can win results - this is the lesson we must learn."

Regarding the campaign for a 12/- rental allowance, Payne continued,

"Here again we see our activities gaining force in the matter of recruiting support from vast sections of the community. Municipal Councils, agents, property owners, building companies are throwing in their weight around this demand."

Large mass meetings had been held, and special local committees had been organised.³⁰⁴

Though it may seem surprising for property owners to join with this demand, it would have been in their best interests if the government had given the unemployed money for rent. (Indeed, in April 1933 The Tocsin had been pushing exactly this argument:

"If we could only convince the small property owners and landlords that it would be just as much in their interest as ours to keep their houses occupied, then we should at least make a step forward."³⁰⁵)

Not surprisingly, a major concern of the conference was the combined union-unemployed campaign against the extension of relief work into government and, possibly private, jobs. Payne spoke of

303. Payne is referring here to the general increase in relief work payments in March 1935; the figures he actually gives are for a man, wife and five children.

304. R.L., 5/6/35, p. 11.

305. The Tocsin, 1/4/33, p. 1.

the collaboration between the A.R.U. and the State Council when certain tram per-way jobs were first gazetted as relief works. "Through our efforts, combined with those of the A.R.U., relief workers were withdrawn from these jobs." He then noted the good alliance built up with the Labor Council:

"We have no hesitation in saying that the recent conference of trade unions and representatives of the unemployed and relief workers has, to a great extent, retarded the incursion of relief work into the railways and tramways and saved the workers in those industries from being reduced to the level of the relief worker. These efforts, combined with the issue of the pamphlet 'The Premiers' Plan In Action' have led to a greater realisation of the need for unity between the employed and unemployed workers.

More important than all I have said in this regard is the fact that your State Council has aroused the whole trade union movement to the dangers that beset it."

He warned the delegates that the struggle had only begun; success depended upon the strengthening of the organisation.³⁰⁶

McAlpine also told the delegates to go back and build up their job committees and organisations. In his report of the recent union-unemployed councils conference he reiterated the Labor Council's support for local unity committees. He also stated that the Labor Council had chosen King, McKenzie and Hade to make speakers notes and prepare a conference of the secretaries and organisers of the unions for a conference in early July. The campaign against the extension of relief work was to be fully planned at this conference. That the Labor Council chose two State Council delegates and only one of its own officials for this

306. R.L., 5/6/35, p. 11.

task shows how fully it backed the State Council now.

McAlpine concluded with a glowing endorsement of the State Council, and was received with rousing applause.

Ewin, the delegate from the building trades, as well as Barker (A.R.U.) and Nelson (Miners' President) also declared their full support for the State Council organisation.

The Conference, in turn, unanimously pledged

"its full support and cooperation with the trade union movement of New South Wales to prevent the further extension of relief works into industry and for the restoration of trade union rates and conditions on all relief works."³⁰⁷

1936 Conference.

By the next State Council annual conference in June 1936 this mutual support between the union movement and the unemployed was even stronger. I have already noted Payne's claim that the "organised unemployed" were then "an integral and powerful part of the Labor movement", and that the Sydney and Newcastle Labor Councils sent delegates to the conference.

307. R.L., 12/6/35, p. 9.

The State Council continued to press the employed workers for united action. Payne's report to this conference (made on behalf of the State Council Working Bureau) reiterated the argument that any attack on the unemployed was an attack on the working class and that the employed workers could only protect their own standards by resisting the further incursion of rationing and relief work. Payne stressed the belief that "the attack that is being launched by both the Government and the employers is today a general attack against the living standards of the whole of the working class."

Payne argued that the 'Prosperity' that had supposedly followed the depression was "unevenly balanced - it is a 'prosperity' enjoyed by the rich at the expense of the workers." He quoted employment and production figures from the mining industry to show that the employers were using 'speed-up' methods to increase productivity (and profits) while decreasing the number of workers (and hence the wages bill). Then analogies were drawn with the 'speed-up' methods used on relief works.

He went on to mention reduction of wages, the Wages Tax, (plus the use of this money for social services instead of relief), the threat of the 'slave camps' of unemployed, the P.I.R., the unemployment of school-leavers, the attack on workers' children through the disallowance of special food orders to rationed

workers and other cuts in social services.³⁰⁸

The conference speeches of the union representatives show that, at the top level of the industrial labor movement at least, such arguments had strong appeal.

Though no figures are given for the number of unemployed and relief workers represented at this conference, the delegate list and delegates' reports show that the organisation certainly was no longer a "small isolated sect". The 301 delegates were itemised thus:

81 Local Branches	-	160 delegates
10 District Councils	-	24 delegates
Northern Provincial Council	-	2 delegates
40 Jobs	-	74 delegates
11 Women's organisations	-	41 delegates. ³⁰⁹

I have already mentioned the fraternal delegates sent from churches and municipal councils.

It is interesting that the women's organisations had proportionately so much larger representation - obviously an attempt to extend organisation in an area which was particularly difficult. (The woman reporting on behalf of the State Women's

308. S.U. & R.W.C., Report of Annual Conference, 1936, pp. 1-5. c.f. also p. 26. As this report covers 32 close-typed pages only the briefest summary can here be given; for a comprehensive account of the State Council's position reference to the full document should be made.

309. Ibid., p. 1.

Bureau stated:

"When a struggle occurs, the women always play their part. Their emotions are aroused but that is not enough. We want the women to come together and plan their work the same as the men, so that when the Government levels its attack they will be...in a position to resist. Quite a number do not see why the women should be organised. They think that organisation amongst the men is sufficient. We cannot get the women along to the men's meetings.....You cannot have a strong united front without the women."310)

Though there is no complete list of the names of the jobs and local branches from which delegates came, the following list of localities mentioned shows how geographically widespread the organisation was: Kearsley, Cessnock, South Maitland, St. George, Wyong, Griffith, Dubbo, Bathurst, Petersham, Ryde, Randwick, Cumberland, Canterbury-Bankstown, North Sydney, Bondi-Waverley, Pyrmont, Balmain, Balgownie, Portland, Wagga, Wakool and Helensburgh.

Locals were still coordinated by district and area councils.

The Northern Provincial Council coordinated the work of some 50 locals which were also linked with 5 district councils. In this area the links with the union movement were stronger than elsewhere. The unemployed had full delegate rights on the Newcastle Labor Council (whereas in Sydney they could only speak on unemployed matters). Mr. S. Bethune, President of the Newcastle Labor Council, stated that the unemployed

310. Ibid., p. 35.

"have a full voice, and show a live interest in things in general. The organised unemployed are not something separate from the Trade Union movement. They are an integral part of it.....The Trade Union movement /has/ supported a number of struggles of the unemployed in the Northern Districts, but the unemployed in turn have pulled their weight in the struggles of the employed in Newcastle. In other struggles the unemployed have had direct representation on the Strike Committees that have been set up. The Trade Union movement recognises and appreciates the worth of the organised unemployed."

Gregory, another Newcastle Labor Council delegate, stressed the unity between the unemployed and union movement in the area.

"The unemployed take the lead in all questions affecting both the employed and the unemployed. Any demands of the unemployed are endorsed by my union and other unions in the North."

The employed workers in the North also gave financial help to the Northern Provincial Council.

The Northern Provincial Council had organised a "broad and representative" Housing Committee to campaign for an extensive housing scheme for the unemployed. It had arranged twelve broadcasts on Radio Station 2KO "to put the case of the unemployed in further developing their many campaigns."³¹¹

The Western District Council coordinated the work of 20 affiliated locals; there was a large delegation from this district at conference. The growth of organisation in this area is particularly remarkable given the distances between towns, the comparative conservatism of country towns and the fact that country

311. Ibid., pp. 4, 7, 10, 17.

unemployed workers were often itinerants.

These delegates "showed that, by constructive proposals in support of a local works programme, they had been able to organise a broad campaign that had been successful in calling a halt to the Government's scheme to set up slave camps in the Blaxland Shire." Most interestingly, delegates protested against "inhuman treatment" of aborigines in the West.³¹²

The South Coast District Council directed about a dozen locals; and organisation had spread to the Riverina area.

In the Metropolitan area there were some 50 locals, covered by 5 District Councils.³¹³

The Conference report itself is a clear indication of the size and good organisation of the movement - it covers 32 very closely-printed pages, and this has been condensed and abbreviated. The report also shows that delegates were encouraged to discuss and contribute to the analysis, and that conference did function as a forum for rank and file opinion. As the report is so long, only the briefest excerpts can be given here; again, the document should be referred to in full for a comprehensive view of the situation.

Payne noted that the Working Bureau had faced "certain

312. Ibid., pp. 4, 7.

313. Ibid., p. 4.

difficulties" since the last conference, "yet we should say healthy ones. Such difficulties arise owing to the rapid growth of organisation and the additional work entailed." The main difficulty referred to was financial; it is notable that there was no mention of problems of isolation and sectarianism which had so involved the earlier conferences of the U.W.M. and United Front of Employed and Unemployed.

As well as the general lack of funds, financial difficulties were caused by the lack of a regular flow of funds to the State Council. Locals had been expected to send in 10% of the money collected from the membership dues, but conference decided that in future a quota system was to be adopted - locals were to pay £1 per 100 members "over and above the existing 10% payments." The Auditors' Report shows how limited was the income of the organisation, considering its size. The income for the year ending May 30th, 1936, was £723.1.7½ (of which only £158.8.11 was sent in as 10% dues from the locals). The expenditure had been £528.0.8½.³¹⁴ Most of the income was raised by things such as raffles and competitions.

As to agitations and activity undertaken during the year the report was in general favourable, Payne noting that "many important struggles have been waged". The "most notable" of these was the West Wallsend strike. Payne continued:

314. Ibid., pp. 6, 8, 9, 10.

"Other struggles that must be mentioned are the strikes at Corrimal, Dubbo and Finley; the fight against the slave camps on the South Coast and in the Western Districts; the Maitland campaign for award rates and conditions; and the many campaigns against mass dismissals following the introduction of the 'Spoooner Scheme'."

(The 'Spoooner Scheme' was a reorganisation of the relief work system formalised in an amendment to the Local Government Act. Spoooner was the Minister for Local Government. Under this Scheme, Municipal and Shire Councils had to find a much greater part of the cost of local relief work; in other words, ratepayers had to finance things formerly funded by the Unemployment Relief Fund. The State Council of Unemployed and Relief Workers objected to it very strongly, partly because working class ratepayers had to provide what the State Council saw as the duty of the Government to provide, and mainly because it entailed what were seen as further inroads on relief workers' conditions. "The Spoooner Amendments are inseparably linked up with the new relief scheme of employment. We know that the Government is making desperate efforts to convert unemployment from a liability into an asset." The scheme was believed to be linked with the Government's efforts to 'speed up' the work - to obtain more work from relief workers for the same wages - and with the drive towards the establishment of country work camps.³¹⁵)

In further accounts of activity, Petersham delegates reported that their campaign against the closing down of relief work jobs

315. c.f. S.U. & R.W.C., Report of Annual Conference, 1936, pp. 4-5, 12-13.

and the dismissal of workers had been successful, but "only because they had carried out months of work which had resulted in the realisation of such demands as those for morning tea and the displaying of Government Gazettes on all jobs."

The work of the Ryde local was an example of the very clear benefits that could be achieved if a local carefully established a working relationship with the Municipal Council. This local established a joint committee of delegates from the Municipal Council and the unemployed, which discussed anomalies arising on the job and at the food relief depot, and then pressed the Municipal Council to overcome them. A Ryde alderman listed

"some of the things that have been rectified - Broken time has been adjusted; Morning Tea is allowed; Payment is now made on the job; The P.I.R. has been partly eliminated. We put up a fight for special food orders. We had the Ryde Council circularise the other Councils asking them to meet the unemployed."

(He noted that in this they "did not meet with much support".)

"Regarding men on strike. We withdrew the order that men on strike should be denied food relief. Clothing has been issued to people who had previously been refused."³¹⁶

Of course, such joint committees could only be achieved if the Municipal Council was some way sympathetic. The 'Spoooner Scheme', by putting an added financial burden onto Municipal Councils, to some extent undermined Councils' support for the Government and provided a small basis for unity between Councils

316. Ibid., pp. 7, 13.

and the unemployed, for both opposed the scheme.³¹⁷

During the year, a strong campaign against the P.I.R. had been mounted; in this we see the State Council's concern for unemployed workers who were not on relief work. The campaign against the P.I.R. was to become more important when, after 1936, a great number of relief workers had to go back on the dole. The State Council claimed that its campaign against the P.I.R. had had

"some measure of success. The P.I.R. was amended to exclude the earnings of children up to the age of 21.... More recently, good work by the Northern Councils, in league with other bodies, forced its non application in respect to young workers who had been denied relief work"

However, the P.I.R. was still "forcing many thousands to live in impoverishment."³¹⁸

The platform of Demands formulated by Conference is three pages long. There were nine demands made in regard to food relief, eight in regard to country work camps, thirty-two dealing with relief work, nine dealing with housing, twelve special 'women's demands', and ten 'general' demands. This platform was essentially a lengthier and more specific formulation of the demands pressed

317. Payne noted that "many Councils", notably Kearsley, Ryde, Cabramatta and Petersham, had responded to the State Council's campaign of opposition to the scheme. Municipal Councils disliked the scheme because it undermined their local autonomy and their right to determine a local relief policy, and because it divided the Councils, forcing all to negotiate separately with the Government in regard to relief work.

318. S.U. & R.W.C., Report of Annual Conference, 1936, p. 5.

for a long time. It was concise though it covered the majority of grievances and anomalies, and was very much geared to the immediate demands (though of course the ultimate demand was still for full work at full pay).³¹⁹

The Rules and Constitution were also formally set out; these covered two and a half pages, and were simply a more specific re-statement of the way the organisation had been constituted over the last couple of years. The name was changed to 'The Unemployed and Relief Workers' Council of New South Wales'.

The Objects were

"to unify and coordinate the struggles of the unemployed and relief workers of New South Wales, to develop and strengthen unity between the employed and unemployed, to safeguard the interests of the unemployed and relief workers in their fight for better conditions, and, in league with the organised trade unions of the State through their governing bodies the Trades and Labor Councils of N.S.W., and any other bodies, to win full time work at award rates and conditions."

The emphasis on non-sectarianism was a notable feature of the Constitution. Membership was to be open

"to all unemployed and relief workers of both sexes, irrespective of political opinions or associations, who accept the policy laid down by the Annual Conference and the State Council from time to time."³²⁰

319. c.f. Ibid., pp. 19-22.

320. Another provision intended to allow as wide a membership as possible was that, though members had to pay a "voluntary contribution of One Penny per week", unfinancial members were allowed to participate in, and vote on, all activities of the local except for those relating to financial matters.

The structure of the organisation was still pyramidal, and the importance of the base of the pyramid - the locals consisting of rank and file workers - was emphasised. "The unit of the organisation shall be the Local or Branch, consisting of unemployed and relief workers of a given locality." District Councils were to be set up "where any number of locals decide that same is necessary." They were not to be set up from the top, by organisers sent out from the State Council.

The importance of regular, representative meetings was also stressed. Locals were to hold weekly meetings, and District Councils were to meet fortnightly. The State Council (elected by Annual Conference) was to hold fortnightly meetings of the metropolitan delegates appointed to Council, and to hold "full and enlarged meetings" to which local and district delegates were invited, quarterly, "or when occasion demands".

Rules of Debate were codified. These were so structured that both full and open discussion and democratic voting would occur at meetings.³²¹

In the election of officers to State Council for the coming year S. Jordan was elected President (unopposed), T. Payne Secretary (unopposed), P. Lynch Organiser (unopposed), W. Ambrose Treasurer, and Mrs. Lahiff Women's Bureau Representative. The

321. c.f. Ibid., pp. 22-25.

State Council was further comprised of 26 members, 10 of whom came from the metropolitan area, and 5 from the northern coalfields area.³²²

PROTESTS, STRIKES AND AGITATIONS.

For convenience' sake, I have here divided the issues over which relief workers protested into four broad categories: firstly, protests arising from the conditions on the relief jobs - the lack of sanitation, shelter sheds, wet weather equipment, first aid kits, etcetera; secondly, protests over pay anomalies - over the lack of margin payments, for payment for time lost through weather, for payment on the job, for fares or some payment for travelling time; thirdly, protests demanding the reinstatement of dismissed workers.

I conclude with a detailed study of the West Wallsend strike, as this exemplifies a fourth type of protest - protest in which relief workers asserted that union principles could not be contravened, for if they were the whole organised labor movement, as well as the relief workers, could suffer a degradation of conditions. Such protests show that the political consciousness of the relief workers was well developed.

322. c.f. Ibid., p. 22 for full list of names.

While dividing the agitations into 'categories' is in most cases rather manipulative, this is particularly so in regard to this category, for many of the protests outlined in the first three sections - for example, demands for margin payments and for the reinstatement of men dismissed for organising on the job - solidly declare the relief workers' adherence to union principles. In a broad sense, all the protests do so - in demanding gumboots, relief workers were conscious that the provision of protective equipment for trench or sewer workers was a right long established by the union movement. However, in protests such as the West Wallsend strike and the agitations against the Government's attempts to speed up the work, the abrogation of union principles was the primary issue.

As well as these four types of protests, there were agitations over other grievances - for example, against the requirement that relief workers had to sign a questionnaire form; one protest demanded the extension of special food orders³²³ - but the great majority of agitations concerned grievances stemming from the work itself.

Issues were not, of course, mutually exclusive. A work gang might hold meetings over, say, the sanitary conditions; the speakers would be dismissed and the men would down tools and demand their reinstatement; in the course of the strike meetings

323. c.f. W.W., 15/2/35, p. 5; 22/2/35, p. 6.

the general position would be reviewed, and the men might finally hold out for the payment of margins. As with the dole protests of the unemployed, the demands often escalated, and the agitations spread geographically; as more jobs joined the strike, they would add their own demands.

JOB CONDITIONS AND AGITATIONS FOR THEIR IMPROVEMENT.

The country relief work camps were commonly referred to as 'slave camps'; we have already noted a comparison of convict chain gangs and relief gangs made by a relief worker. Such claims were not just overblown rhetoric: the conditions on many relief jobs, in the metropolitan area as well as the country, were vile. Most Australian workers had not suffered such job conditions for many years. They had grown to regard a certain level of safety and sanitary provisions not only as necessary, but as their right, for such regulations had been won by years of union pressure and had been conceded by the Arbitration Court. So the bad relief conditions were viewed by relief workers not just as a deterioration in their quality of life, but as an abrogation of workers' rights and union principles.

The agitations over conditions should not, then, be dismissed as trivial. Compared with the Bankstown-Newtown eviction fights,

a deputation by forty men for morning tea time, for example, may seem negligible. However, in enforcing such a provision the men won more than the face-value of the demand: they asserted their position as workers in their own right, rather than mere relief workers; they demanded the privileges of Australian unionists and by doing so maintained that their unemployment did not put them outside the labor movement. Finally, by claiming some control over the job they broke down some of the alienation of the unemployed worker, they claimed some right to control their own lives.

Not only were the conditions bad, but many relief workers were particularly unsuited for rough work. After years on the dole their physical condition had deteriorated. Their boots and clothing were often not adequate for clearing scrub or digging wet trenches.

Most of the work was some kind of pick and shovel work, which skilled and white-collar unemployed had never before attempted. A man signing himself 'Professional' wrote of the plight of unemployed professional men. He asked: "Can our Government not find something of a more suitable nature than road and sewer work for these unfortunates, who have spent the best years of their life in hard study to attain success and a standard of efficiency?"³²⁴ Not only would such men have found the job unaccustomedly arduous,

324. S.M.H., 28/2/34, p. 9.

but they would have felt frustrated by their inability to use their training and potential.

This lack of recognition of a man's suitability for a job was a prominent feature of the system. Even the Herald noted, in an editorial, that "in relief work, as often as not, the wrong man is ineffectually blistering his hands in the wrong job."³²⁵

Even among the unskilled, years of worklessness had unaccustomed them to such labour, and had made many unfit to perform it. One unemployed paper, noting the fatal heart attack of a relief worker on a local job, stated:

"There are hundreds of men working for the dole who are not in a fit state of health to do manual work. Men who have been following an office calling for a number of years are asked, in the winter of their lives, to do physical labor for the dole, and others are not receiving sufficient money to purchase the necessary food to do hard work.

The longer men and women are working for the dole (a mere existence), the less they will be able to resist a general breakdown in health."³²⁶

The unsuitability or unaccustomedness of the work resulted in accidents, sickness, collapses and even deaths. Though there are no statistics pertaining to this, the regularity of references to such cases in the unemployed press suggests that many workers were injured or fell sick, and quite a number died.

325. Ibid., 10/1/35, p. 11.

326. The Beacon Light, 25/11/33, p. 2. (c.f. also R.L., 26/4/33, p. 6. Cessnock relief workers protest that they are not fit enough for the conditions and long hours of work.)

Because award conditions were suspended on relief jobs, safety provisions relating both to equipment and health were often ignored. In late '33 the Red Leader ran two articles citing specific cases of such abuse, in particular of the precautions against silicosis and other 'dusting' diseases of the pulmonary and respiratory organs. It added that the physical debility of the relief workers laid them open to T.B. The awards also laid down that certain tools - pneumatic jack picks, for example - could only be used for specified periods of time, and these provisions too were set aside on many jobs.³²⁷

The Water Board Employees' Union protested to the Minister for Labour about such conditions - for example, relief workers were working an eight-and-three-quarter hour day and forty-four hour week while the union award for that particular class of work stipulated a twenty-five hour week and the silicosis compensation scheme also laid down that such work should only be done for five hours a day. The Union also complained about the lack of sanitation and provision for drying clothes.³²⁸

There are many terrible accounts of accidents resulting from an irresponsible attitude on the part of work supervisors, to the use of dangerous equipment.

For example, one issue of the Lidcombe relief workers' paper

327. R.L., 4/10/33, p. 8; 1/11/33, p. 8.

328. S.M.H., 5/7/34, p. 7.

reports a man crushed to death between two boulders when a gelignite charge exploded prematurely, and another relief worker gashing open his ankle with a pick.³²⁹ Both these accidents were obviously caused by the negligence of men unused to working with their equipment; the point, in regard to the gelignite at least, is that untrained men should not have been given such tasks. In the second accident the man unnecessarily lost a great deal of blood because there was no first aid kit on the site. This again shows the authorities' lack of proper concern over the safety of relief workers.

In other such cases, one relief worker narrowly escaped death when he accidentally struck a gelignite charge with his pick. He was injured in the explosion.³³⁰ Two relief workers died at Ryde when the trench banks collapsed onto them; there had been no board reinforcement on the banks. In a similar accident at Waterfall, one man had died and another was badly injured.³³¹ Another relief worker died at Maroubra because of faulty equipment,³³² and a Rockdale worker died after a job injury.³³³

A relief worker wrote to The Torch:

329. The Mattock, 23/11/33, pp. 1 and 3.

330. S.M.H., 9/10/34, p. 12.

331. R.L., 12/6/35, p. 8.

332. Ibid., 26/6/35, p. 16.

333. The Beacon Light, 25/11/33, p. 4.

"Last Tuesday...a worker employed on the... job at Bibby St., Kogarah, received an injury resulting in a fractured foot. This was the second accident that has happened on the same job in about a week. The other worker had his head injured and is now on compensation. Both accidents were caused while drilling rock with a hammer and jumper. The workers concerned were inexperienced at the work, so it is quite easy to see how the accidents happened. To put a hammer in the hands of an inexperienced worker to do a job of that description is dangerous. Not to the boss, of course, but to the workers concerned."

The letter ended:

"We ^{must} just organise for the sake of our own safety and build our job committees on the job. The only way to improve our conditions is to organise. It is our job and nobody else's."³³⁴

This last statement shows the relief workers' feeling that they did have rights to some control over their conditions.

I have already cited one case where the lack of a first aid kit endangered a relief worker. Many jobs had no kits and the demand for a first-aid kit on all jobs was part of the routine platform of the relief workers' movement. While many could be recounted, the following shows not only criminal negligence in the provision for the workers' safety, but also the ridiculous bureaucracy involving the relief work system:

"A worker in the Barton Park 'A' Scale Gang injured his head while working on the job. He was bleeding freely. When the first aid man arrived with the kit it was found that there was no basin with which to bathe the wound, or scissors to cut the hair away, in the kit. The first-aid man...asked the Ganger about

334. The Torch, 24/11/33, p. 6.

scissors and tweezers. The Ganger stated that he had been told by a first-aid man that first-aid attendants were not allowed to use scissors or tweezers. The Ganger was then asked how the bandages were to be cut, to which he did not reply."³³⁵

It is hard to know whether to laugh or cry at a system in which tweezers are regarded as dangerous, but gelignite and pneumatic rock drills are freely handed out.

As to the deaths caused by weakness and the arduousness of the work, there is room here to cite only a few cases:

"During last week a relief worker dropped dead in a trench. Weakened by malnutrition, this worker - aged sixty-four - was forced through economic pressure to keep going on relief work."³³⁶

"Forced to work in drenching rain, H.A. Fulcom, dole worker, collapsed and died at Five Dock..... He had been out of work for two years..... His stamina and health were undermined."³³⁷

Cent Park
A seventy year old relief worker on the Centennial Park job collapsed and required hospitalisation; he had been running loaded barrows along a plank.³³⁸

The Lidcombe Unemployed and Relief Workers' Council reported to the State Council that in a period of six weeks there were six deaths in families of relief workers, in most cases of the workers themselves.³³⁹

335. Ibid.

336. The Magnet, November 1936, p. 3.

337. W.W., 28/7/33, p. 4.

338. Ibid., 20/10/33, p. 4.

339. Ibid., 19/1/34, p. 5; c.f. also Ibid., 8/9/33, p. 1, and R.L., 17/1/34, p. 4 for 2 more deaths.

Hundreds more would have suffered temporary illness and collapse, and many would have permanently borne the results of sudden strain.

Relief workers were not only vulnerable to accidents or collapse, but the sanitary conditions of the jobs laid them open to disease as well as severe discomfort. There were often either no lavatories or filthy ones, no fresh drinking water, no shelter sheds, no washing facilities. Moreover, a lot of the work was on sewerage jobs and the workers at times had to work in cess pools without good boots.

Two relief work poems already recorded refer to the smell of the Sanitary Dump and working in slimy sewers; complaints about the filthiness of the conditions appeared regularly in the unemployed press.

Redlight! asked:

"When are the Lane Cove residents going to object to the obnoxious effluvia which is steadily arising from the bush surrounding the job. And will the Council decide to arrange decent sanitary conditions for the men.....someday, perhaps?"³⁴⁰

The Torch noted:

"On the Rowe Street job the Kogarah Council has not provided any lavatory, and the men are compelled to use a lavatory at the rear of a public hall. The seat of this lavatory is in a filthy condition and.... has never been cleaned since the job started a month before. As the warm weather approaches fevers etc. can be expected in our midst."³⁴¹

340. Redlight!, undated copy (early 1935).

341. The Torch, 29/9/33, p. 3.

When the large Sutherland relief work scheme was on trial in April 1933 the local Rank and File Committee complained: "Of the six hundred workers employed, not one gang has any kind of shelter shed or lavatory."³⁴²

Another relief worker wrote:

"I started.....work-for-the-dole at Queen Victoria Street (Bexley) last week. I noticed, when the gangs were sorted out, we were marched up to the tool box and told to take a pair of gum boots that had come off other jobs and never been disinfected since last being used by other men. Some two or three years ago the matter of many of the Water Board Employees having bad feet was found to be caused by men wearing one another's gum boots..... On this job it looks this way: that we either contract disease of the feet by using boots that hundreds of others wear, or we go without and get rheumatism and very likely become crippled for life."

He added that the lavatories were "of the old-fashioned type" and that after only two days "the smell was very obnoxious and the flies were a pest."³⁴³

While this worker feared catching disease from the boots provided, many relief workers did not run this risk - for in many cases no boots were provided. The Mayor of Forbes complained that "the police would not supply all workers with new boots, and it was not right to expect the men to work in winter months with their feet through the soles of their boots." There had been a

342. R.L., 26/4/33, p. 8.

343. The Torch, 24/11/33, p. 3.

boot repairing depot set up at Forbes in connection with the relief work scheme, but the Department of Labour and Industry decided to close it down. An alderman stated that "it seemed as though this was the thin edge of the wedge to whittle down the benefits for relief workers."³⁴⁴

Conditions in the country afforestation and road-work camps were often particularly bad, and in these the men did not even have the respite of returning home to wash and rest after a day's work. One worker wrote of the insanitary camp at Bowning (near Yass) where a number of young Sydney men were building a road. The tents were too close together.

"The lavatory pit is situated about eight or nine yards from the camp..... In wet weather the vicinity of the camp is a bog-hole, and the water runs through the tents. The men work thirty hours per week..... The wages are 2.6.8 per week. There are no marginal rates for skilled labour.... Workers receive no compensation if they are injured on relief work....."

There were no showers.³⁴⁵ At an afforestation camp at Lithgow the men were to receive two chaff bags as camp stretchers.³⁴⁶

Complaints about bad conditions usually concluded with a call to organise for their improvement. For example, the Bexley dole workers were advised:

344. S.M.H., 20/10/34, p. 20.

345. The United Bushworker, Official Organ of the Pastoral Workers' Industrial Union of Australia, Vol. 1, No. 1, 20/8/36, p. 4. In this scheme the hours were less and the pay probably more than usual.

346. W.W., 11/5/34, p. 5.

"It is usual for Councils to supply conveniences, drinking water, first aid kits, etc. on the jobs only under pressure. See that pressure is applied right from the start. Organise on your job and elect a job committee. See to it that proper conditions exist on your job. It is your task."³⁴⁷

A large number of jobs were able to win some concessions. For example, a job committee at Concord met with the Engineer in charge of the work who granted their demands for a shelter shed, decent lavatories and coverings for water tins. He also agreed to the appointment of a job committee member to watch over job conditions.³⁴⁸ The Orange Bush-Workers' Committee forced the provision of new drinking mugs and water bags and other similar concessions.³⁴⁹ In a few months of organisation Dubbo unemployed and relief workers won a number of small concessions: conveyance to and from the job; first aid kits; proper rate of pay for men concreting footpaths; an extra police officer to hand out the dole, to cut down delay; even the promise of a dental clinic.³⁵⁰

In most cases protests over conditions took the form of deputations rather than strike, though demands for sanitation etcetera were often included in a strike protest arising from other issues. There were however some strikes sparked off by

347. The Torch, 24/11/33, p. 4. (c.f. also W.W., 20/7/34, p. 5. A Maroubra relief worker writes in about rotten conditions and the lack of any job organisation and asks for a speaker to be sent to the job.)

348. W.W., 29/9/33, p. 2.

349. Ibid., 15/2/35, p. 4.

350. The United Bushworker, 26/11/34, p. 2.

conditions. The Concord West-Homebush Bay Swamp Job strike is the most notable example. Another such case was the strike of Banksia sewer workers in September 1934.

When Banksia relief workers were "put to work in the channel where the filthy sewerage lies in a stagnant pool", two workers were so affected that they had to stop work. The whole job then stopped in their support. When the Ganger "refused to drive the men into this filthy portion, which (was) knee-deep" the Engineer in charge sacked him. Two hundred relief workers went on strike. When a new gang of two hundred was sent to replace them, the strikers won them over to the strike. A rank and file committee of thirty was formed to organise relief, propaganda and social committees, and the support of the local relief workers' council was won. As well as refusing to work in the sewerage channel and demanding the reinstatement of the Ganger, the men demanded that their fares to work be paid.³⁵¹ The job was picketed each morning by about two hundred men, and mass meetings were held each afternoon. A strike bulletin was issued, and collections for relief were taken up at local factories and relief jobs.

After a deputation interviewed St. Peters Council, a delegation of aldermen and relief workers inspected the site. The Council agreed with the men about the filthiness of the Channel, and the aldermen placed a room in the Town Hall at the disposal of

³⁵¹. W.W., 21/9/34, p. 6.

the Strike Committee and agreed to join a deputation to Dunningham.

After two weeks' strike the men returned to work with a victory "all along the line". Bellemore had promised that the channel would be cleaned out, they no longer had to work in filth and the ganger was to be reinstated. Moreover, a "solid foundation for future organisation" had been laid.

"At the beginning of the strike there were only about thirty active workers on the various committees. At each succeeding mass meeting others were brought into activity, with the result that by the end of the week over fifty workers were busily engaged."³⁵²

In a much smaller strike at Charlestown, thirty men who were refused boots would not work until boots were provided.³⁵³

As hours of work were often long and conditions were unpleasant, the lack of provision for morning tea time was a real grievance felt by many workers. It would seem that many jobs won this concession either by a show of force or simply by quiet defiance - by boiling up their billies behind the Ganger's back.

When twenty-five workers at Woronora Park were told there was to be no stoppage for morning tea they stopped work for ten minutes and had their tea. A lunch time meeting decided on direct action if anyone was victimised for tea-breaks, so the ganger backed down.³⁵⁴

352. R.L., 26/9/34, p. 12; 2/10/34, p. 4.

353. W.W., 9/2/34, p. 1.

354. Ibid., 16/11/34, p. 5.



Redlight! undated issue (April 1935)

This under-cover wangling of morning tea is amusingly expressed in this cartoon from Redlight! shown opposite.

The very title of this paper suggests that there was a tacit agreement among relief workers to engage in minor acts of defiance when the Ganger was away - loafing, meetings, perhaps the occasional petty theft of materials. 'Redlight!' was the alarm call used to alert gangs of the Ganger's approach³⁵⁵ - used much as the call 'Traps' was by the miners in the nineteenth century. Such an agreement among the members of a gang would boost their morale and create a feeling of cohesion which would provide a basis of solidarity if a protest arose.

It should be noted that relief workers' attitudes to Gangers largely depended on the treatment they received from the particular Gangers. When Gangers enforced requirements regarded as obnoxious by the workers, the strike or protest would be directed against the Ganger as much as against the relief work system. When, however, the Ganger sympathised with the men they would be willing to risk their livelihood and strike on his behalf - as in the case of the Banksia sewer workers. This shows that their protests were not just blind acts of rebellion against the forces of authority, but were conscious, political acts arising from formulated grievances.

355. Interview with I. Wyner. This call may only have applied in the area covered by this paper, but probably there was some signal used on most jobs.

PROTESTS OVER PAY.

Considering the low wage rates paid to relief workers it is not surprising that there were numerous protests over payments. Some of these were concerned with the amount of pay, others with the method of payment. Apart from the fact that the low wage made existence difficult, it emphasised that the work was dole work.

Most of the grievances in regard to payment outlined here were included in the various platforms of demands of the State Council.

While relief workers did not come near to winning their main demand of full-time relief work at award pay rates, they were able to force some improvements. Gains were often restricted to a certain area, but the winning of skill margins by some gangs would encourage others to mount their own struggle. The gains may also seem slight - an improvement of a penny per hour, for example - but, given the smallness of the original payments, these would be a real improvement. Such concessions would also be seen as a moral victory.

Finally, it could be argued that the general improvement of relief work rates was forced on Stevens by the continual publicity and protest about the pay. The State Council, as we have seen, claimed that the increases granted in May 1934 and March 1935 were the result of the campaign mounted by the local and district

councils, and, in regard to the first increase, particularly the result of the Homebush Bay struggle. Though it is impossible to prove such claims, it does seem probable that without the agitations for increased pay and the public and union support aroused by them, any increases would have at least been delayed, or less substantial.

The most important and most numerous protests over relief payments were concerned with the absence of extra margin payments for skilled or particularly arduous jobs. The justification for such margins had been recognised for years by the Arbitration Court, but they had been set aside in regard to relief workers. The fight for margin payments most particularly demonstrates the relief workers' assertion of their identification with the union movement and of their right to union standards.

One of the longest margin strikes occurred at Como in 1935. This strike shows how during a protest the list of grievances would develop, and also how support would grow.

The trouble arose when the Public Works Department refused to pay the customary penny-per-hour margin for rockchopping. (That even the Herald states that the rate was 'customary' indicates the force of the men's grievance.) On Thursday January 4th, three men refused to work unless paid the margin. They were immediately dismissed. The next day a deputation demanded their reinstatement. When they were told that any refusal to work at the ordinary rate

would mean dismissal, fifty-odd men walked off the job.³⁵⁶

The men set up publicity, social and relief committees, and asked the State Council of Unemployed and Relief Workers for leadership. The wives and mothers of the strikers were drawn into the organisation. The final rank and file strike organisation comprised forty men and women. It won the support of local residents, the Shire Council and other relief workers. Speakers from the job arranged for the Labor Council to put the case to the unions. A strike fund was mounted; within three weeks donations totalled £77.16.1½ - the sum itself shows the support. One relief job paid a voluntary levy of 1/- per man.

The support went beyond the Como area and beyond the labor movement: the Newtown, Randwick, Enfield, Petersham and Lidcombe Municipal Councils asked the government to grant award wages and conditions to rockchoppers. Como businessmen convened a public meeting of support attended by the Shire Council, the local A.L.P., the Women's Strike Committee, the State Council and even local cricketers. It instructed the M.L.A. for the district to introduce a deputation to Dunningham and raise the matter in the house, demanding the reopening of the job at the pre-Christmas conditions (when margins were evidently paid). The men now also demanded ten minutes morning tea time and the reopening of the boot-repairing depot, as well as the reinstatement of the three men.³⁵⁷

356. S.M.H., 8/1/35, p. 9.

357. W.W., 11/1/35, p. 6; 25/1/35, p. 6; 1/2/35, p. 5.

The strike lasted for nearly a month at least. Though the sources unfortunately peter out in early February, giving no specific account of gains won (beyond forcing the Government to grant a dole issue two days in advance), it is clear from Payne's enthusiastic account of the strike that it resulted in some success. At the State Council's 1935 Conference he declared:

"This struggle, from an organisational point of view, was far in advance of any strike that we have yet undertaken. Here the whole of the strikers were drawn into activity.... Their wives and families did practical work..... Meetings of the strikers were held daily. Each striker had a task to perform. Strike bulletins were issued at regular intervals; speakers' notes were prepared.....

The work of the women exceeded all expectations. By gathering their forces, marching and demonstrating with the men....they compelled the government to issue food relief to the strikers and their families.

Sufficient was collected to give full and plenty to every striker and his family. Over £100 was collected, and the strike terminated with organisation strengthened and consolidated which in itself is of the utmost importance."³⁵⁸

In other strikes over margins, Tarro Shire relief workers refused to do quarrying work at the ordinary rates.³⁵⁹ Four hundred Cessnock relief workers adopted a go-slow policy when the Public Works Department refused bonus payments to leading hands and men operating concrete mixers.³⁶⁰ Eighty Concord men struck because they maintained hammer and gad work should be paid at

³⁵⁸. R.L., 5/6/35, p. 11.

³⁵⁹. W.W., 8/9/33, p. 1.

³⁶⁰. S.M.H., 13/10/34, p. 16.

rockchopping rates.³⁶¹ A hundred Manly relief workers on four jobs struck when six men who refused to do rockchopping at the relief work rate were dismissed.³⁶² Port Kembla lorry drivers won back margins of a couple of shillings for haulage work.³⁶³ Some Sutherland jobs won an extra shilling a day for work in wet places.³⁶⁴

A strike at Wollongong shows how the duplication of authority on the jobs hampered the workers' ability to put their case. All Wollongong relief workers stopped work when men doing road-repair work were suddenly required to do trench work with no extra pay. The strike committee arranged with shopkeepers for credit to be given to the strikers. When a deputation approached the Town Clerk he stated that the grievances were between the men and the Government, not the Council. However, the Wollongong Labour Bureau, representing the Department of Labour, told the men that it was up to the Council to act. After a week the men returned to work under protest, deciding to send a deputation to Dunningham.³⁶⁵

Another grievance was that relief workers were often given only a few days', or a couple of weeks', work, at the end of which

361. S.M.H., 12/4/35, p. 11.

362. W.W., 24/11/33, p. 1.

363. R.L., 6/9/33, p. 12.

364. R.L., 7/6/33, p. 8.

365. S.M.H., 31/1/34, p. 14; 1/2/34, p. 15; 7/2/34, p. 14.

they had to re-register for the dole and go without food for the incumbent waiting period, for relief wages were not enough to tide them over this time; sometimes the wages would be above the P.I.R. limit so the dole would be disallowed for a couple of weeks.

Clyne, the Labor member for King, complained about this in the 1932 Budget debate, even before the extension of relief work in the E.R.W. scheme had caused so many to suffer because of this anomaly:

"The Department of Labour and Industry is week by week calling up men and offering them work. Men are called and placed in work for one week, in some cases for a shorter period. They are then stood down for two weeks, and in the meantime they are removed from the food relief list. Consequently they are suffering very considerable injustice."³⁶⁶

A complaint linked with this was that relief workers were paid retrospectively but the dole stopped when work began, so they often had to spend the first working week without any relief, or with dole for only a couple of days.

In October '33 relief workers at Fairymead-North Illawarra struck when they were not allowed the dole though they were not to be given their wages for a couple of days: consequently they had to spend a couple of days without food. The strike won an immediate response, though it subsequently failed. At Balgownie nearly all the workers stopped and many Corrimal and Keiraville workers marched to the ration bureau and demanded the dole. A

366. N.S.W. P.D., Vol. 134, 20/10/32, p. 1390.

central meeting at Fairymeadow decided to do no more work till a week's dole was given, and a strike committee of twelve was elected. The strike committee was joined by the local W.I.R., a bulletin was issued and shopkeepers were asked to give credit to the strikers. Miners' officials recommended that all lodges give support, but nothing seems to have come of this. At the second mass meeting, three days later, a vote on the continuance of the strike was taken by three hundred strikers; 104 were in favour, 123 against - so though the strike was called off it is clear that many were willing for further action. The meeting resolved that they only returned to work "under protest", that there would be a further mass meeting and that a mass deputation would press for one week's dole payment.

The Red Leader blamed the failure largely on the Strike Committee: there were many weaknesses from the first; the Committee was not broad enough and carried out little activity among relief workers; it failed to meet; it did not enthuse the workers to continue.³⁶⁷ These complaints were probably valid. At this stage the relief workers' movement had not had much practical training in the best strike methods. The Red Leader concluded:

"Every man at the (second) meeting went home realising the need to set up job organisations and link up their activities in the unemployed area Council."

A grievance similar to this was the demand for payment on the

367. R.L., 25/10/33, p. 1; 1/11/33, p. 12; W.W., 3/11/33, p. 5.

job at the proper time - at the end of the week or cessation of the job. Relief workers were sometimes forced to wait days for their pay, or to walk miles to get it. For example, a Nowra relief worker wrote of bad local conditions: they were forced to work in the next shire. The Ganger's residence was fourteen miles away, over a range of mountains to Kangaroo Valley. There was no transport or payment of travelling time. They had to wait at Nowra for the Ganger to cash the wages cheque.

"If the Ganger feels like it, he may visit Nowra on Friday afternoon; if not, then the men don't get paid till Saturday. The latter is the case nine times out of ten."³⁶⁸

As soon as emergency relief work began at Kembla Heights in May '33 the workers elected a job committee of nine to demand payment on the job (with 100% work increase as well) and won the support of the Mt. Kembla rank and file miners.³⁶⁹ Rockdale relief workers demanded payment for the hours they were kept waiting on the job for their pay to arrive.³⁷⁰

When Drummoyne and Five Dock relief workers were told they must wait nine days for their pay they made a mass demonstration on the Town Clerk demanding payment on the job. The Mayor

368. W.W., 4/1/35, p. 4.

369. R.L., 17/5/33, p. 6.

370. R.L., 26/4/33, p. 8.

capitulated after the men stopped work.³⁷¹

In November 1933 three hundred and sixty Port Kembla relief workers struck because Windang men working in Port Kembla had to walk five miles to get their pay. A number of local strike and relief committees were established and arrangements were made with a cooperative store to supply the strikers with food. Local unions were circularised for support, which was given at least by the F.E.D.F.A. By the time the men returned to work they had won these concessions:

- 1) Workers to be given transport when getting pay and starting tickets.
- 2) Windang men working in Port Kembla to be paid travelling time.
- 3) Right for all strikers to make up for time lost during the dispute.
- 4) No victimisation.
- 5) All back time to be paid for by the next Friday, irrespective of whether it has been worked or not.³⁷²

Though the Communist Party pointed to various shortcomings regarding this strike - not enough organisation, for example³⁷³ - it obviously was highly successful. The support given by the

³⁷¹. W.W., 8/12/33, p. 6. (Here again we see the importance of the workers being able to confront the local authority, immediately a grievance is formulated.)

³⁷². W.W., 24/11/33, p. 1; 1/12/33, p. 1.

³⁷³. W.W., 8/12/33, p. 2.

employed workers was probably crucial. As with the Fairymead strike the relief workers resolved to keep up the organisation after the strike concluded.

The demand for transport, fares or payment for travelling time was a common one; the issue was particularly important for country workers who often had miles to walk before a hard day's work. This demand was often included in a large list of demands and was often one of the minor concessions won even if the original strike issue was lost.

Two hundred and fifty Charlestown relief workers went on strike, demanding that time spent travelling be included in the job, for they had to walk four miles each way to work.³⁷⁴

Travelling time was the main grievance of the Lithgow job committees in late '33. The men decided to walk the last one and three quarter miles during work time; the Ganger subsequently deducted the time from their wages. The men evidently remained firm over this issue, held mass meetings and sent a deputation to Dunningham; there is unfortunately no record of the outcome.³⁷⁵

The Uralla Bush Workers' Committee met with the engineer in charge of relief work because workers had to walk four miles to work. He agreed to their claim that the men were entitled to walking time over three miles, and gave them back pay for the

374. W.W., 9/2/34, p. 1.

375. W.W., 20/10/33, p. 3. For a similar complaint at Grafton
c.f. W.W., 10/8/34, p. 3.

extra mile walked each day.³⁷⁶ The Dubbo committee also won the provision of transport to the job.³⁷⁷

It is likely that this provision for payment for travelling time over three miles was itself won by relief workers' agitation; it does not seem to have been introduced till 1934.

In the Tallegandra Shire relief workers agitated for some time for transport to the job, and the Minister for Labour finally ruled that the Council should provide transport for men travelling over three miles to work. The protest apparently backfired, for the Council decided to abandon the work altogether.³⁷⁸

Yet another complaint over pay was that workers often lost time through wet weather or holidays or for other reasons not of their own making, and were not allowed to make up the time lost and so received a loss in pay.

Four hundred Warners' Bay relief workers decided to strike if they were not allowed to make up one day's lost work.³⁷⁹

Such a demand was to be at times extended to a claim that workers should be allowed to make up time lost through protest.

For example, when the Merrylands Dole Workers' Council called a stop work meeting and demonstration outside the Mayor's house

376. The United Bushworker, 5/9/34, p. 3.

377. Ibid., 26/11/34, p. 2.

378. S.M.H., 3/10/34, p. 4.

379. W.W., 25/5/34, p. 6.

in March 1934, the demands included that time lost through the stop work should be paid for. (Other demands included a three-pence bonus for concrete mixer drivers, marginal rates for quarrying work, the reinstatement of a ganger who had been removed for supporting the workers' demands, and the reinstatement of some dismissed workers. Of the eleven demands presented in all, seven were granted and the rest were still under consideration when the men returned to work.³⁸⁰

This demand that time lost through protest should be made up, or should even be paid for, was a clear assertion of relief workers' belief in their right to strike.

PROTEST AGAINST DISMISSALS.

The demand that dismissed relief workers be reinstated was a common one. We have already seen it voiced in agitations that flared up over other issues - in the demand of the Banksia sewer workers that the ganger be reinstated, for example. The Como strike had erupted when three men who refused to work under the award were dismissed, as had the Manly strike over rock-choppers' rates. This was common: grievances over conditions or pay which

380. Ibid., 9/3/34.

had been rankling for some time were often brought to a head by dismissals.

The issue of sackings and reinstatement also often developed in the course of an agitation that had been sparked off by something else, for often a few militants were weeded out of a gang that was protesting over conditions.

Sometimes dismissals were the primary grievance, and an agitation would in the beginning be solely motivated by the demand for reinstatement (though often other demands were added in the course of the agitation).

Though I have already dealt with some protest over dismissals I am outlining more, partly because the issue was so common, partly because it was a matter of union principle, and partly because the relief workers were often victorious over this issue.

Protests over dismissals provide a further example of how, in the relief work situation, it was often easier to protest than it was for unemployed workers on the dole. In the earlier period militants were often thrown off the dole. Sometimes an agitation would develop, sometimes the militants would win back the dole. But it was hard to organise the agitation. Often the majority of the unemployed of the area would not even know that men had been denied relief. When men were thrown off relief work, all the gang would know immediately; moreover, they would know the dismissed men themselves, they would know the ganger or the engineer or

whoever it was who had sacked them. The sympathy and support of workers in neighbouring gangs could easily, and immediately, be won. There was little that the doleys could do to force the relief authorities to put the militants back on rations: they could meet, march, pass resolutions, send deputations; the issue was not seen to be grave enough to cause them to boycott the dole. When relief workers were suddenly sacked, however, the workers in the gang could, and often did, immediately down tools. In short, dismissals gave relief workers a clear, easily comprehensible, immediate issue to build a protest around.

Protests over dismissals also illustrate the sense of solidarity and comradeship that the relief workers had; an attack on one was seen as an attack on all.

They show again that the relief workers maintained that they had a right, as workers, to strike or protest. The men sacked were often those dubbed 'agitators' by the authorities; they were the men who called lunch-hour meetings or gave out pamphlets. By dismissing them, the authorities were denying the relief workers the right to organise or protest. By demanding their reinstatement, the relief workers were demanding the same rights as unionists to have job spokesmen, to hold meetings.

So an agitation for the reinstatement of three or four men was not trivial; it asserted a basic union principle.

There are further reasons why relief workers were so adamant

on this issue. The dismissals were sudden, peremptory. When a relief worker saw a comrade summarily sacked for addressing a meeting, or perhaps for just working slowly, or for back-answering a ganger, or for refusing to do an intolerable or impossible task, his immediate thought would have been 'Will I be next?' So it was in his self-interest to protest, to show the authorities that they could not simply dispose of men.

This feeling of fear of one's own dismissal was of course intensified by the fact of being without work for years, and further by the knowledge that this was not proper, necessary work, that the Government did not need to employ one, that there were thousands more who could fill one's place. Relief workers seem to have been continually preoccupied with the fear that suddenly the whole relief work scheme would stop, that thousands of them would be thrown back on the dole, or perhaps be left without any relief.³⁸¹

The government and the relief authorities made it clear that they would not tolerate, and were determined not to employ, any dissidents.

An instruction sent by the Department of Labour and Industry

381. e.g. there was strong protest against the Public Works Department when 310 men employed in Centennial Park were suddenly dismissed because, the engineer told them, there was no more money so the job had to close down. 1,000 more were to be dismissed from jobs in Queen's Park and University Park. W.W., 12/1/34, p. 5.

to the Baulkham Hills Shire Council clearly defined "the attitude which Councils should adopt towards relief workers under their control."

"Part of the policy set out by the Department was that if any of the workers took part in stop-work meetings they automatically discontinued their employment, and before they could be re-engaged a report should be sent to the Department. Time thus lost could not be made up.

The Department stated that when relief workers displayed a tendency to avoid work, or did not carry out their work to the best of their ability, they should be first warned; and, if this had no effect, suspended from work for a given period.....The Department said that time off could not be allowed for delegates to place matters in dispute before their organisations, nor could time off be allowed for representations about alleged grievances with the work. Such representations must be made outside working hours."³⁸²

In mid 1934 the Workers' Weekly declared that "on practically all relief jobs a tabulation of Communists and militant workers generally is taking place", with a view to breaking the militancy of the relief workers.³⁸³ This was probably true. Militants certainly were persecuted. For example, in February 1935 Bill Bagwell, the Concord district organiser for the State Council of Unemployed and Relief Workers, who had formerly been cut off the dole and relief work, was again refused registration for work or relief because of his activity in a recent large strike at Concord. The excuse was that he had refused work. After signing a

382. S.M.H., 26/7/34, p. 6.

383. W.W., 20/7/34, p. 5.

declaration that he would accept work, even in the work camps, he was still refused registration on the grounds that he had missed a call-up. "Finally he was told that he was not to be registered.....On pressing for a reason, Bagwell was told he had caused too much trouble." At this time he had been off relief since May 1934 - a total of nine months.³⁸⁴

There were more direct ways in which militants were opposed. Some gangers tried to turn the workers against organisers. At Holroyd in September '33 a ganger hit a member of the Unemployed Council who was distributing a job bulletin. The ganger then unsuccessfully tried to persuade the workers to throw the man in the creek, and finally suspended him from the job and had the police arrest him for assault. (The worker had won the fist-fight that began when the ganger hit him.) At around this time every gang in the area was patrolled one day by the police, who aimed to stop the distribution of bulletins. They arrested one man who was giving out bulletins, reportedly after tipping him off his bike, pushing their boots through the front wheel, and "smashing into" him. (The workers resolved to hold stop-work meetings and a protest march.)³⁸⁵

At about the same time a ganger on the Centennial Park job

384. Ibid., 22/2/35, p. 5. (He had originally been cut off the dole because of his activities in the Homebush Bay struggle.)

385. W.W., 29/9/33, p. 4.

Cut
back

tried to organise the workers to throw a speaker from the State Council into the pond. This too was unsuccessful.³⁸⁶

These accounts of the action taken against men who tried to organise on the jobs makes it clear why dismissals sparked off so much protest. We must now consider some more of these protests.

The Merrylands-Holroyd area seems fairly to have bred protests over dismissals.

We have already seen how the Labor Council and State Council of Unemployed and Relief Workers protested against the dismissal of regular employees in this area in June 1933, and how relief workers protested against the intimidation of an organiser in late September.

In August there was another agitation when four dole workers were sacked. On August 28th a member of the Dole Workers' Council and the four men visited nine or ten gangs in the area, outlining their case that they had been victimised. (This assertion does seem justified, for their ganger had refused to sack them, so the engineer in charge had moved them to another job and then dismissed them.) All gangs visited downed tools and marched off to see the mayor; six delegates interviewed him and demanded the reinstatement of the men. The mayor stated he would consider the case. A stop-work meeting of every gang and a march was planned for the next day. The men were reinstated, apparently before the

386. Ibid., 20/10/33, p. 4.

threatened action.³⁸⁷

In June-July '34 there was another agitation at Holroyd over the dismissal, and alleged victimisation, of three relief workers. Following the State Council policy, the local relief workers sent a deputation to the municipal council, which, after first refusing to see the deputation, finally agreed to institute a committee of enquiry. The men then pressed for representation on this committee.

Bagwell advised the men that if there was no reinstatement they should hold a mass meeting, and force the reinstatement. If successful, they should publicise the fight in the local relief work paper "and all gangs should be notified through their gang delegates in order to show the soundness of job action to as many workers as possible."³⁸⁸

Thus we see how a successful agitation was used to raise the level of agitation generally.

The Mayor's appointment of a committee of enquiry in this struggle is interesting, for it seems that at this time the Government set up a number of Boards of Enquiry to investigate charges of victimisation. It is most likely that this was a result

387. W.W., 1/9/33, p. 1; R.L., 13/9/33, p. 1.

388. W.W., 29/6/34, p. 1; 13/7/34, p. 6. At one of the protest meetings speakers included Sharkey (for the C.P.A.), Bagwell (State Council) and Keniry, Wilson and Gibson for the A.L.P. This again shows how the united front with the A.L.P. did work at the low level of organisation.

of the large number of protests over victimisation, thus showing that the protests were causing concern to the authorities.

The State Council argued against the constitution of these boards, against the fact that they had no unemployed delegates and were intended to collect evidence only, and began a campaign for workers representatives on the Boards.³⁸⁹

One of the larger protests over dismissals began at Granville in January 1934. The engineer in charge dismissed a relief worker because of his alleged insubordination. On Tuesday, January 16th, the strike began. Reports conflict over how many workers were involved in the strike - the Herald puts the figure at three hundred, noting that on Wednesday 17th one hundred returned to work, the other two hundred staying out.³⁹⁰ The Workers' Weekly claimed that seven hundred went on strike.³⁹¹ On Wednesday there was a mass meeting, which was patrolled by police. The meeting was orderly, and decided to send a deputation to Dunningham.³⁹² The man was speedily reinstated - it would seem on the Thursday.

On Friday 19th the Workers' Weekly noted that the strike had recommenced because the strikers had not been allowed to make up

389. W.W., 20/7/34, p. 5.

390. S.M.H., 18/1/34, p. 16.

391. W.W., 19/1/34, p. 4.

392. S.M.H., 18/1/34, p. 16.

the time lost during the strike.³⁹³ It would seem that they were successful in this demand also. The Herald noted that the strikers returned to work on Monday 22nd, because they accepted the recommendations of the special committee that investigated the dispute. Dunningham had told the deputation that he would investigate all their demands.³⁹⁴

This agitation is a classic example of how a successful agitation could raise the level of struggle in other areas.

At the same time as this, forty Manly relief workers held a successful strike over the dismissal of a fellow worker.³⁹⁵

On Tuesday 23rd, one hundred and twenty Bankstown relief workers went on strike in support of a ganger whom the Public Works Department had "acted against", and one hundred Punchbowl workers struck because a worker had been dismissed. The Bankstown strikers resumed work on the 24th (it would seem because they had been successful) but the Punchbowl workers stayed out.³⁹⁶

At this time, Dunningham stated that Communists were busy "causing trouble" among relief workers and that they were "leading a number of workers astray." He threatened protestors that their dependents "would suffer disadvantage."³⁹⁷

393. W.W., 19/1/34, p. 4.

394. S.M.H., 23/1/34, p. 10.

395. Ibid., 18/1/34, p. 16; W.W., 19/1/34, p. 4.

396. S.M.H., 24/1/34, p. 13; 25/1/34, p. 13.

397. Ibid., 24/1/34, p. 13.

The Granville strike had further ramifications. When the deputation had interviewed Dunningham they had demanded that Special Food Orders be given to the Granville women who had been refused them, though entitled to them. Dunningham had declared that the orders would not be withheld.³⁹⁸ (The Labor Council also had protested against the withdrawal of the orders in Granville, and had requested that unions "give all the support possible" to the demands for their restitution.³⁹⁹)

Despite Dunningham's promise, the orders were withheld, so in February Granville women organised a 'dole strike'. (It is not made clear exactly what form the protest took.) Finally fifty women went in a deputation to the local member of parliament, and the demand for the orders was granted. The Workers' Weekly claimed that whereas formerly only £30 was spent on special food orders in the area, the value of the orders now given was £300. Not only had the agitation forced the government to grant the orders, but it had awakened many women to the possibility of applying for them.⁴⁰⁰

This agitation was one of the few times in the Depression that women banded together and mounted their own protest.

There is only room here to mention some of the other strikes over this issue. The Orange Bush-Workers Committee forced the

398. Ibid., 23/1/34, p. 10.

399. T.L.C.M., 18/1/34.

400. W.W., 23/2/34, p. 1; 2/3/34, p. 5.

reinstatement of a worker dismissed for inefficiency after a twenty-minute strike.⁴⁰¹

When the members of a deputation protesting over the sacking of one worker at Centennial Park were also sacked, the fifteen members of the gang walked off in protest.⁴⁰²

A relief worker at Bardwell Park who was medically unfit for hard work was dismissed when he asked for assistance. When the deputation protesting over this was also sacked, eighty men downed tools. The engineer agreed to reinstate the men, but refused to allow the workers to make up the time lost through the strike, so they stayed out. Police broke up one of the strike meetings, and two organisers were arrested, and allegedly bashed, while walking down the street.⁴⁰³

Thirty Botany workers struck when five of their comrades were dismissed.⁴⁰⁴

Three gangs at Corrimal struck because the local unemployed secretary was allegedly victimised by the engineer. Their demands included that they should be allowed to make up time lost through rain in the previous week.⁴⁰⁵

-
401. W.W., 15/2/35, p. 4.
402. Ibid., 4/5/34, p. 6.
403. Ibid., 23/2/34, p. 6.
404. Ibid., 8/3/35, p. 5.
405. S.M.H., 19/11/35, p. 10.

One hundred and fifty West Maitland relief workers struck because of the dismissal of thirteen men and a ganger for alleged idling. A strike committee of thirty was elected, and they decided to appeal to the sewer workers for support. Their demands included the dismissal of one of the officials on the job, and the revocation of the system of warning dockets. As so often occurred, their hostility was strengthened by the use of police against them: they were particularly resentful because the local Council called the police in to break up their march to the Town Hall.⁴⁰⁶

Two hundred Maitland relief workers downed tools for three hours when a worker was suspended because he had allegedly used offensive language.⁴⁰⁷

Thirty-eight Concord West relief workers were suspended when a ganger was attacked during a deputation over the dismissal of another worker. They all won their jobs back, but lost a day's pay.⁴⁰⁸

The protests over dismissals were of benefit not only to the workers who had been sacked from particular jobs and who were reinstated, but to the whole relief work agitation, for they showed that relief workers would not acquiesce in attempts to

406. Ibid., 18/11/35, p. 8.

407. Ibid., 12/12/34, p. 21.

408. Ibid., 14/12/34, p. 11.

prevent them from meeting, speaking, organising and protesting. The show of strength put up by workers on jobs where were dismissed probably prevented many other activists from being victimised in other struggles.

THE WEST WALLSEND STRIKE.

It is fitting to end this Chapter with a study of the West Wallsend Strike, for this agitation reflects many of the themes already outlined.

I have chosen this strike as an example of the way relief workers fought on issues which they believed contravened union principles, as an example of the agitations in which they fought for the rights, not only of relief workers, but of the working class. Such agitations show conclusively that the relief workers not only saw themselves as part of the organised working class movement, but rightly regarded themselves as such.

Of course, most of the protests already detailed reflect this assertion that union principle should not be abrogated, and that relief workers had a right to conditions long-established by the union movement; in many, relief workers demonstrated their solidarity with the working class movement in general.

However, in this strike there was a difference in degree in the solidarity with employed workers and union principles declared by the relief workers. In this strike the primary demand was the withdrawal of the Returned Soldiers and Sailors' Preference Act, which broke the right of equal employment opportunity long established by the union movement; it was the Government's use of this Act on the West Wallsend works which was the immediate cause of the strike.

It is also fitting to conclude with this agitation because it was, and was seen at the time to be, a most important one.

Its main importance was its concrete assertion both that relief workers had a right to union rights, and that relief workers, seeing themselves as part of the organised labor movement, would fight for the rights of all workers.⁴⁰⁹

Another noteworthy feature was the determination and strength of the strikers.⁴¹⁰ Although this strike was numerically much smaller than the Homebush Bay agitation, it was the longest relief work strike held in New South Wales. Beginning on June 30th 1935, it was not to end until October.

409. A speaker at a meeting of the Newcastle Trades Hall Council said that the West Wallsend men's fight was "the best expression of working class solidarity he had seen". N.M.H., 12/7/35, p. 12.

410. W.W., 16/8/35, p. 4, notes "No previous struggle of relief workers has ever witnessed such solidarity" on the part of the strikers. This was probably true.

Also important was the careful organisation of the strike; this could hardly have been bettered.

Furthermore, the strikers aroused wonderful support, in particular from employed workers and the unions, but also from many who were not part of the labor movement.

In September, one R. Darrell wrote in the Communist Review:

"The movement which has developed around the West Wallsend relief workers' strike, and which has to-day developed into a wide mass movement throughout N.S.W., is of particular importance at the present time for the whole of the labor movement.

It is important because of the wide united front which has developed, beginning with the relief workers and spreading rapidly to the trade unions, mines and workshops; it is important because of the political content which has been introduced and linked firmly with the economic demands of the unemployed and relief workers; finally, it is important because the great mass of the workers see in the Returned Soldiers and Sailors' Preference Act very definite attempts by the war-makers to cripple the trade unions and other organisations of the working class."⁴¹¹

Darrell's third claim is interesting, for it shows the unemployed movement looking ahead, beyond its own grievances, to the danger of war. In this agitation a considerable amount of propagandising against war was done, and there are indications that the use of the Returned Soldiers and Sailors' Preference Act re-aroused some of the opposition to the First World War in

411. R. Darrell, "West Wallsend Relief Workers' Strike and its Development", Communist Review, September 1935, p. 55.

sections of the labor movement.⁴¹²

Another interesting thing about this agitation is that the strikers' position was closer to that of regular, permanent workers who struck than was usual in relief work strikes. The value of the work scheme was such that they were able to force the Government not to discontinue it, when the Government threatened to do so in an effort to break the strike.

This capitulation was in fact only one of many. The final importance of this strike is that it ended in victory. Moreover, the gains won were not just limited to this area and these workers; some of the concessions were applicable to all relief workers, and important principles in regard to relief workers' right, and ability, to put their demands were established.

Trouble had been brewing for at least ten months before the strike.

The relief workers' unrest and dissatisfaction initially had its basis in the Government's attempts to 'speed-up' and economise

412. e.g., when strikers attended a Shire Council meeting, one speaker "claimed that he had been the first victim in the Shire of the Preference to Returned Soldiers Act. He was the father of five children, he said. Why should they be made to suffer because he had not shouldered a gun and killed people on the other side of the world - men with whom he had no grievance?" He was loudly applauded. N.M.H., 12/7/35, p. 11.

on relief works, to get faster and more results for the same, or even less, wage costs. After about the middle of 1934 the Workers' Weekly often attacked these 'speed-up' methods, and from that time there were a number of strikes and protests against the new methods.⁴¹³

In about July-August, 1934, the Lake Macquarie Shire Council had agreed to the Government's orders to alter work conditions so "to allow for a higher standard of efficiency at a lower cost.Orders were given that gangers' jobs would be carried out by the relief workers themselves for an extra two shillings per day over relief rates, as compared with £4/19/6, payable under the union awards."⁴¹⁴

That relief workers objected to this, despite the fact that it meant that some of their number would receive more pay, again shows their solidarity with union principles and with regularly employed workers.

Up to this time jobs which carried margin payments were assigned to relief workers in the Lake Macquarie Shire by a roster

413. e.g. 70 Bellambi relief workers struck in June '34 when a ganger, who had been told to "speed up the swamp workers as the job was costing too much", declared that "he was not prepared to be a slave driver", and was consequently sacked. Good public support was won on this issue, and all but 3 of the men remained solid for 5 weeks. The strikers won their two demands of the reinstatement of the ganger and the discontinuation of 'speed up' tactics on their job. W.W., 22/6/34, p. 6; 29/6/34, p. 1; 20/7/34, p. 1.

414. R. Darrell, op. cit., p. 55.

system; this "permitted all relief workers to receive, in turn, the extra money." Now the roster system was abolished, under Government orders, and all jobs that carried margin payments, including sub-gangers jobs, were given to men selected by the Shire Council's Engineer.⁴¹⁵

The men objected strongly to the institution of this preference system; apart from the fact that it was unfair, the preference system was seen as an abrogation of union principles, and also as a way in which activists could be punished and sycophants rewarded.

Meetings against both these changes were held in the West Wallsend area. However, the organisation of the unemployed and relief workers in the area was at this time led by moderates. The local Communist Party fraction tried to agitate the relief workers to struggle against the changes, but the moderates succeeded in persuading the workers to accept the new conditions "under protest".⁴¹⁶ In September, the relief workers decided "under protest" to work under these conditions and that a deputation of workers and the Shire President (- evidently at least some of the

415. *Ibid*; N.M.H., 11/7/35, p. 10 (quoting from a circular issued by the Strike Committee. The extra money for sub-gangers, 3d an hour, made a difference of between 1/9 and 9/- per week in relief workers' wages - a considerable amount, given the smallness of the pay).

416. R. Darrell, op. cit., pp. 55-56.

Shire Council members opposed the new system -) would interview the Minister for Labour and Industry in regard to a reversion to the old system. The Minister refused to see them.⁴¹⁷

Shortly after this the moderate leaders were "exposed" by members of the District Council of Unemployed and Relief Workers' and of the State Council, and the local leadership of the unemployed was won by militants.⁴¹⁸ Agitation against the conditions continued, but did not really come to a head.

There was however a campaign for morning tea time in October, which resulted in the Lake Macquarie Shire Council allowing relief workers a 'Smoke-oh'.

Though the workers were not willing to mount a large-scale strike, their activity was enough to discomfort the Government severely. In November it was stated on behalf of Dunningham that the Department had decided to close down certain relief works under the aegis of the Lake Macquarie Shire Council "because that body lacked control over the men." About 1,050 relief workers in the Lake Shire and the Adamstown Municipality⁴¹⁹ were to be put

417. N.M.H., 11/7/35, p. 10. (From Strike Committee's circular.)

418. R. Darrell, op. cit., pp. 55-56. The moderates were Craig, Webb, Pearce and Britt. Oddly enough, they were given jobs as gangers. Their leadership was repudiated by 2 mass meetings of miners, employed and unemployed, held at West Wallsend. Webb scabbed during the strike.

419. Departmental officers who inspected the scheme at Adamstown had also reported that this Council "had little control over the men, who lacked discipline." S.M.H., 6/11/34, p. 9.

off. However, this still left about 2,000 relief workers in the area.

The charge that the Council "lacked control" over the relief workers clearly referred to the fact that the Council had a certain sympathy for the men, had granted some of their requests, and did not like enforcing the Government's speed up methods.⁴²⁰ It also showed the Government's fear that a large protest would develop in the area. The Herald's report of Dunningham's declaration noted that there had been "considerable agitation" over conditions in recent months.⁴²¹ The Workers' Weekly described the closing of these jobs as "a vicious attempt to break the fighting spirit of the relief workers who had been successful in winning their demands."⁴²²

The Council

"was informed that amendments to regulations governing the works would come into force from November 12. Uniform working hours would have to be observed throughout the shire. The practice of allowing 'smoke-oh' would have to be discontinued forthwith, and gangers and sub-gangers must pay special attention to malingering."⁴²³

Dissatisfaction with the work conditions and especially with

420. This sympathy and sometimes support from the Council is not surprising, as most of the rate-payers were working class and the area had a tradition of leftism.

421. S.M.H., 6/11/34, p. 9.

422. W.W., 9/11/34, p. 6. (The demands won are not detailed. The morning tea time campaign was probably the main victory.)

423. S.M.H., 6/11/34, p. 9.

the preference system and the speed-up methods continued over the next half year, as did agitation against them.

It is noteworthy that, despite the relief workers' discontent, they were not willing to strike until the introduction of the Returned Soldiers and Sailors' Preference Act. This shows how important the relief workers judged this Act to be. Darrell, in describing how the militants ousted the moderate leaders, wrote:

"At first the workers in West Wallsend area, remembering the sell-outs of the past, were slow to respond to the call for strike action, and althougha militant line /had been/ accepted in words, it was not until the provisions of the Returned Soldiers' Preference Act were enforced that a majority of the workers decided to resort to strike action."⁴²⁴

To understand why the use of this Act should evoke such a response, we must look at the way workers at the time, both regularly employed unionists and relief workers, saw the Act.

Section 3 of the Act, which embodies its main principle, declared:

"Notwithstanding anything contained in the Industrial Arbitration Act, 1912 or any Act amending the same, or in any award or industrial agreement made thereunder, every employer shall give preference in employment in any profession, business or industry to a returned soldier or sailor who is capable of effectively performing the duties of such employment."⁴²⁵

424. R. Darrell, op. cit., p. 56. c.f. also N.M.H., 11/7/35, p. 10. This traces the long history of dissatisfaction with the work conditions, but notes that the use of the Act was the final issue which determined the workers to strike.

425. R. Darrell, op. cit., p. 58.

At the West Wallsend relief works, jobs that carried marginal payments were to be given to returned servicemen.

The Act clearly abrogated the union principle that all workers should have equal employment opportunities. Darrell in his article and speakers at various strike meetings declared that this Act provided for the smashing of trade unions and that it was an attack on the whole trade union and working class movements. Unionists believed that any preference system should be opposed, as any use of such a system could be the thin end of a wedge which could be used to introduce a general preferential system, in which employment would be given only to non-unionists, and hence trade unions would be broken and the rights they had established would be abrogated.

Opponents of the Act also declared that the use of the Act was an attempt to divide the working class in preparation for war, and for increased profits for employers. The use of the Act would be likely to set workers who had fought in the war against those who had not; this division would further undermine unionism and workers' solidarity. Because the Act would weaken the unions, it was believed that the employers would be able to exploit their workers further, and hence win increased profits. Finally, the Act was seen to glorify war.

The introduction of this Act at West Wallsend, coming as it did upon a situation in which the workers had already a strong grudge against preference systems, decided the relief workers to

make a stand against the Act, against any system of preference, and for union principles.

A relief workers' meeting was held at West Wallsend on Sunday, June 30th. Returned soldiers and sailors were asked to refuse to exercise their preference, and the meeting decided to demand that the seniority principle be established in regard to all jobs offered through the Labour Exchange. A deputation demanding that the Act not be used waited on the Lake Macquarie Shire Council, but was informed that preference had to be enforced.⁴²⁶ The meeting decided to strike if the demands were not granted.

It seems that no further developments occurred until a week later, though there were probably meetings during this week in which the Act, and possible action, were discussed.

On Monday, July 8th,

"dissatisfaction with the method of appointing sub-gangers and the preference to returned soldiers, was responsible for 100 of the 150 relief workers on the construction of the Kurri-West Wallsend road ceasing work."

Many of them walked to the Council offices where they interviewed Lowry, the Engineer. Lowry stated that he could do nothing in regard to these complaints and that "if any action were taken it would have to be by the Lake Macquarie Shire Council."⁴²⁷ The

426. N.M.H., 11/7/35, p. 10.

427. Ibid., 9/7/35, p. 6.

men decided not to return to work until the demands were granted.

By the end of the next day 344 men had downed tools. Their demands were the withdrawal of the application of the Returned Soldiers and Sailors' Preference Act, the employment of gangers according to a rotation system, that all bonuses for men on special work be shared by the men on the roster, and that men who had lost time during the morning tea time strike in October be allowed to make it up.⁴²⁸

By the night of Wednesday 10th, it was estimated that about 400 men had struck. During the day there had been only a few men working in the West Wallsend, Young Wallsend, Homesville, Estellville, Barnley and Wakefield districts.⁴²⁹

Although there were about 2,700 or 2,800 on the relief work roll throughout the shire,⁴³⁰ there were only approximately 800 men working in the areas concerned in the dispute; the Act had not been enforced uniformly. That 400 had struck by this stage shows a virtually unanimous support for the strike⁴³¹ as "at least half" of the men in the affected area were not due to start work until towards the end of the current fortnightly work period

428. Ibid., 10/7/35, p. 6; S.M.H., 10/7/35, p. 14.

429. N.M.H., 11/7/35, p. 10.

430. S.M.H., 17/8/35, p. 19 states 2,700; N.M.H., 11/7/35, p. 10, 2,800.

431. Indeed, a relief worker stated on Thursday 11th that within 4 days they had been successful in withdrawing all but 4 men from the various works. N.M.H., 12/7/35, p. 11.

(about Tuesday 16th), so had "not yet been placed in the position of having to refuse or accept work."⁴³²

The strike was well organised from the start, and meetings were held almost daily, to publicise the issues, decide on methods of organisation and protest tactics, and to build up the solidarity and determination of the strikers. A large number of pamphlets were circulated.

On the night of July 9th there was a mass meeting of about 400, "including a fair number of women". A circular was issued by the District Council of Unemployed and Relief Workers, and McKenzie, the principal speaker, explained the meaning of the Returned Soldiers and Sailors' Preference Act. The meeting decided unanimously that West Wallsend relief workers should hold to the decision of the Sunday (June 30th) meeting to strike.⁴³³

On Wednesday, July 10th, there was another mass meeting at which, according to Darrell, "the relief workers of West Wallsend, numbering 680, decided to strike." Seven main demands were formulated. They were:

- "(1) That the Shire Council shall not apply the provisions of the Returned Soldiers and Sailors' Preference Act in the matter of marginal rates whether in the appointment of gangers or any other marginal rate appointments, and to ensure this, all work carrying marginal rates shall be on a bonus system to be determined by the men on each job along with gangers.

432. N.M.H., 11/7/35, p. 10.

433. Ibid.

- (2) Right for the men who were deducted pay on the last dispute in relation to the matter of morning tea.....to make up that time, and in future 10 minutes be allowed men to take morning tea.
- (3) Payment of all money due to the men who have performed work carrying marginal rates in the past and who have been denied such money.
- (4) Gangers or other men not to be allowed to perform two or more marginal rate jobs at the one period.
- (5) Shire Council to observe and pay marginal rates for all works that carry a bonus under the Gazette covering the work.
- (6) Men on all scales to be permitted to do their work in a nine-day period each fortnight, to permit them at any time within the nine days to have one or more days in which to seek other work or make up time lost for other causes.
- (7) Council to provide bicycles for the use of time-keepers, or in addition to paying prescribed bonus for this work, to grant an allowance of 1½d. per hour to the timekeepers for using their own machines. Runners also using bicycles to be paid 1½d. per hour."⁴³⁴

Two things should be noted in regard to this platform. Firstly, that the opposition to the Returned Soldiers and Sailors' Preference Act was placed first; secondly, that as well as this demand, which in practice applied to margin rates, three other demands concerning margin rates were put.

Darrell notes that the meeting asked the State Council for assistance in the strike.⁴³⁵ The State Council did give

434. R. Darrell, op. cit., pp. 56-57.

435. Ibid., p. 57.

considerable help, both financial⁴³⁶ and organisational, to this strike, and McKenzie was a prominent figure in the early stages. The State Council clearly saw this as a test case in mounting a campaign against the Returned Soldiers and Sailors' Preference Act.⁴³⁷ However, the backbone of the strike organisation depended on rank and file relief workers actually involved in the strike, and also on their wives. At this meeting a "wide strike committee of more than sixty workers" was elected;⁴³⁸ from this, sub-committees for publicity, relief, social activities etcetera were established. A notable feature of the strike was the way rank and file workers were encouraged to develop their organisation and speaking skills. A class on organisational work was begun, and was attended by some 35 relief workers.⁴³⁹

The strike committee decided that

"the strike must not be the end of the movement, but that the aim should be to consolidate in the strike centre and to broaden the movement to the trade unions, workshops, and to the whole of the unemployed movement in New South Wales."⁴⁴⁰

This aim was in large part fulfilled.

436. N.M.H., 11/7/35, p. 10 noted: "It is stated that the men who have refused work have done so on the understanding that ample financial assistance will be forthcoming from the Unemployed and Relief Workers' Association in Sydney." It is clear that the State Council was the organisation that the paper was referring to.

437. The C.P.A. was particularly hostile to this Act, and the Workers' Weekly had run a number of articles explaining, in length, the possible ramifications of the Act.

438. R. Darrell, op. cit., p. 57.

439. W.W., 20/8/35, p. 4.

440. R. Darrell, op. cit., pp. 57-58.

The Tuesday night meeting had decided that relief workers should attend the meeting of the Lake Macquarie Shire Council on the night of Thursday 11th, and state their case. On that night 600 relief workers, led by a pipe band, marched eight miles to the Council offices.⁴⁴¹ They were accompanied by a hundred women and children in buses. They packed the Council meeting, and demanded to be heard.

The Council had decided that "no good purpose could be served by meeting a deputation at this stage, since the Government alone can change the regulations."⁴⁴²

As with the February 1934 strike over margins at Wollongong, the duplication of authority on relief works meant that each separate authority could simply pass the buck to another. The Department of Labour and Industry opted out of the argument in the early stages:

"The Department's attitude was that the Council should handle the dispute until it was shown that satisfactory settlement could not be achieved. Meanwhile, the Council would be required to adhere rigidly to the Departmental regulations."⁴⁴³

The Department wanted the Council to do its dirty work, and to bear the full weight of the ensuing opprobrium. The Council was

441. N.M.H., 12/7/35, p. 11 gives these figures. S.M.H., 12/7/35, p. 11 says 300 marched 7 miles. The former was probably accurate, this paper being closer to the action.

442. N.M.H., 12/7/35, p. 11.

443. Ibid., 11/7/35, p. 10.

indeed in a difficult position; it had little sympathy with the regulations, but if it did not enforce them it would lose its control of the scheme, and would probably lose the scheme itself. At the meeting on the 11th the Councillors were generally sympathetic to the demonstrators,⁴⁴⁴ but stressed that their hands were tied.

The Council told the protestors that if they resumed work, the Council would "refer their requests to the Government". It also agreed to meet a delegation on Monday 15th. When unemployed representatives continued to address the meeting, Council agreed to hear immediately a deputation of three men and a woman. The demands were outlined, including one "that Council recognise all job committees and allow the right of free speech on all jobs." McKenzie, speaking for the unions as well as the unemployed, said "he understood the position of the Councillors, and would not ask them to do something that was impossible." He added that they simply wanted the Council's cooperation.

The woman speaker declared that the women of the area stood solidly behind the fight.⁴⁴⁵

At the end of the meeting the men marched back to West Wallsend where they held a meeting. Though they were strongly

444. Ibid., 12/7/35, p. 11. President of Council said he had always done his utmost for the unemployed. He was to remain solid with the strikers.

445. Ibid.

determined - that they walked 16 miles in the cold of a July night shows this - they were not violent. The police who were present were "not required".⁴⁴⁶

On the same night, representatives of the strikers addressed the Newcastle Trades Hall Council, and asked for solidarity and assistance from the unions, in particular for the unions to guarantee the credit of the strikers' relief committee. In the motion asking for support the unemployed representatives stressed that the question of the Soldiers' Preference Act

"affects the whole trade union and working class movement. The....Act, aiming as it does at the breaking down of union principles, is particularly vital to the trade union movement, and, in view of the present war situation, is of importance to the working class."

A returned soldier seconded the motion. Though there was some disagreement, the motion was carried. The Secretary of the Trades Hall Council told delegates to report back to their unions, and to instruct members to implement the decision.⁴⁴⁷

As we shall see, the strike evoked good support from the union movement - from the Sydney Labor Council and individual unions as well as from the Newcastle T.H.C.

Members of the strike committee and representatives of the State Council of Unemployed and Relief Workers soon held a conference with the Newcastle Trades Hall Unity Committee and drew

446. S.M.H., 12/7/35, p. 11.

447. N.M.H., 12/7/35, p. 12.

up a programme of demands in addition to the strikers' own platform. This new programme was endorsed by special conferences of trade unions, workshop committees, unemployed workers and other groups, called by both the Sydney and Newcastle Trades Hall Councils. These demands were:

- "1. Continuance of works in the Lake Shire and elsewhere at award rates and conditions.
2. 100 per cent. increase in food relief.
3. Non-application of the Returned Soldiers and Sailors' Preference Act inasmuch as it violates the principles of trade unionism.
4. Abolition of the Permissible Income Regulations, which compel returned soldiers and sailors and others to maintain unemployed members of their families on their small pensions and inadequate incomes.
5. Weekly rent allowance of 12/- to be paid to all impoverished returned soldiers and other workers in order to save them from eviction by the War Service Homes Commission and other mortgagees.
6. Garnishee Act to be amended to exempt all wages that are below the basic wage."

Darrell noted that:

"From this programme it will be recognised that the strikers and also the working-class movement generally recognise that the returned men are their class comrades, and proved that objection was not being taken to increased living standards for their returned mates, but that the objection was taken to the attempt to divide and split the working class in preparation for war and for increased profits for the Australian capitalists."⁴⁴⁸

On Monday 15th the Shire Council met with the strikers' deputation. The strikers put to them six of the seven demands

448. R. Darrell, op. cit., p. 59.

decided on by the July 10th meeting; in place of demand number 5, they asked that an extra threepenny margin be paid for certain jobs. The Council agreed to the six demands, and decided to put them to Hawkins, and also to ask Hawkins to issue food relief to the strikers. 449

The Council's support for the strikers decided the Department of Labour and Industry to assert its authority. On Tuesday 16th Hawkins declared that there "appeared no other course" but to close down the relief works (- all the relief works, not just those concerned in the strike -) in the Lake Macquarie Shire, and that he would instruct his officers to do so. The Minister for Labour and Industry declared that he would not receive a deputation of strikers. 450

By this time, the second batch of men in the affected area had been called up for work, and the majority of them had refused it. The sources are slightly contradictory in regard to the number who struck. The Herald on July 17th stated that "about 680" had struck. It seems, however, that this paper inferred this from the number who had voted in support of a strike at the July 10th meeting (where some women probably voted) and that 650 men actually struck. Later reports, from both the Communist and capitalist press give the number as 650, and it is certain that

449. N.M.H., 16/7/35, p. 7.

450. S.M.H., 17/7/35.

- 114 -

either none, or virtually none, of the original strikers resumed work.⁴⁵¹ This number represents four fifths of the workers from the affected area. The total number immediately affected by the strike - that is, including the wives and children of the strikers - was around 2,000.⁴⁵²

Hawkins' move was clearly an attempt to break the strike by dividing the relief workers of the Shire, by turning those still at work against the strikers and using their resentment at losing work against the strikers.

However, the strikers remained adamant. They called the Government's bluff, pointing out in a circular issued to the non-striking relief workers that the Government was unlikely to discontinue the scheme as this would cause £50,000 worth of work to be wasted; they added that the Government would still have to pay out £2,000 a week in food relief as opposed to £3,000 in wages, but would get nothing in return.⁴⁵³

The Government either took their point, or reached the same conclusion independently, for on either the next or the second day after this pronouncement it decided not to withdraw the scheme at present. Clearly the amount of support aroused by the strike

451. e.g. Ibid., 1/8/35, p. 10; W.W., 16/8/35, p. 4: "Each and every man of the original 650 remains solid."

452. W.W., 13/8/35, p. 4.

453. R. Darrell, op. cit., p. 60; W.W., 6/8/35, p. 4.

also contributed to this decision. In the hope of undermining the solidarity of the strikers, the Government offered them starting docketts. However, the strikers refused them, demanding that the Government meet a strikers' deputation and declaring that they would not work until the Act was withdrawn.⁴⁵⁴

In response to this refusal, Hawkins again decided that

"in view of the attitude adopted by the men concerned, and by the council, in supporting certain of their demands there did not appear to be any option..... except to withdraw the scheme in the shire."

He declared that the scheme would be closed down at the end of the current work period. He further repeated that

"in no circumstances would any representations by /the strikers/ be considered whilst the men were out on strike."⁴⁵⁵

The Government was to capitulate again. The work was due to end on Thursday, August 1st. On the Wednesday night Stevens announced that "he had agreed to representations" asking him to extend the work in the Shire for two weeks. He added that the strikers would not be reinstated; the Government did not want another slap in the face. Stevens also stated that the Government "would review the position in the light of what action might be taken by the Council"; the possibility of the Government taking over the scheme was expressed.⁴⁵⁶

454. S.M.H., 20/7/35, p. 15 (notes less than a dozen applied for starting docketts); 1/8/35, p. 10; W.W., 6/8/35, p. 4; R. Darrell, *op. cit.*, p. 60.

455. S.M.H., 20/7/35, p. 15.

456. *Ibid.*, 1/8/35, p. 10.

These threats worked upon the council. On the next day, the Lake Macquarie Shire Council decided, by 5 votes to 4, to rescind its decision of July 15th to ask the Government to accede to the strikers' requests, and fell in with the Government's work conditions.⁴⁵⁷ The President of the Council, who had voted against this, said "he was ashamed to lead a Council that went back on its decision to support the strikers."⁴⁵⁸ About two hundred relief workers and women marched to the Council meeting and protested against the Council's withdrawal of support. The Council decided to ask Hawkins to receive a strikers' deputation.⁴⁵⁹

After this, there were no more threats to close down the scheme. It is likely, however, that the Government's backing down on the decision to end the work was due more to its realisation of the reaction this would produce from the strikers' supporters, than from the Council's final acquiescence to the Government's ultimatum.

Darrell noted that "in the course of the struggle the Government has done a series of somersaults."⁴⁶⁰ As well as changing its mind four times over the withdrawal of the scheme, the Government was also forced, by the threat of mass demonstrations and the undoubted support for the strikers, to reverse its

457. Ibid., 2/8/35, p. 12.

458. W.W., 9/8/35, p. 2. (He declared this at a huge public meeting in Newcastle on August 2nd.)

459. S.M.H., 2/8/35, p. 12.

460. R. Darrell, op. cit., p. 60.

decision not to grant food relief to the strikers.⁴⁶¹ This was a great victory for the West Wallsend men, as the refusal of relief to strikers was one of the Government's most firmly held principles. Furthermore, it enabled them to stay out on strike. As we saw with the Homebush Bay strike, hunger was often the immediate and primary cause of a return to work.

By early August, both the organisation and the determination of the strikers were well established. From this time on, mass support for the strikers increased even further, and large support meetings were regularly held.

On August 1st there were mass demonstrations of support in other centres. These were to be followed by "intense organisational work by the trade union movement and the unemployed councils" to organise more mass meetings and to gather signatures for the two petitions to the Governor that were being circulated. It was hoped that the petition from the north would get 50,000 signatures. The other petition was put out by the New South Wales Labor Council and the State Council of Unemployed and Relief Workers. The petitions called on the Governor

"to intercede with the State and Commonwealth Governments, in having the millions of pounds which are proposed for war preparations divided into channels which will provide for better living conditions for the unemployed, and also in support of the demands of

461. Ibid.; W.W., 6/8/35, p. 4; S.M.H., 20/7/35, p. 15.

the [West Wallsend] unemployed."
The joint petition was "nearing completion" by September.⁴⁶²

On August 2nd a huge public meeting was held in the Newcastle Town Hall. This was addressed by strikers' representatives, unemployed workers, union leaders, clergymen, and some shire and municipal aldermen and mayors. The speakers unanimously supported the demands. A "wide and representative" deputation was elected, to wait on Hawkins.⁴⁶³

On August 4th state-wide demonstrations of support were held, and were well attended despite bad weather.⁴⁶⁴

A meeting on August 3rd showed how very wide was the support for the strikers. On that day two Communists, J. Jones and D. Gillies, met with the recently-formed Northern Assembly of the New South Wales A.L.P.⁴⁶⁵ Arising from the discussions the Assembly resolved:

- "a) That the Assembly endorse the West Wallsend relief workers' strike.
- b) That the Assembly expresses its hostility to the non-union principles embedded in the Returned Soldiers' Preference Act.
- c) That the Assembly appeal to all Leagues to organise support and signatures for the mass petition to the Governor.

462. W.W., 6/8/35, p. 4; 9/8/35, p. 2; R. Darrell, op. cit., p.60.
The petition requested a 12/- rent allowance, 100% dole increase and other demands from the State Council's platform.

463. Ibid.; W.W., 9/8/35, p. 2.

464. R. Darrell, op. cit., pp. 59-60.

465. This functioned as the top-most council of the A.L.P. leagues of the North.

- d) That Mr. J. Kidd (A.L.P.) and Mr. J. Jones (C.P.A.) confer on the best method of coordinating and activating the forces of both parties, in accordance with the above decisions."⁴⁶⁶

This meeting laid the foundations for good united work between the Northern A.L.P. and the No. 2 District Committee (the Northern branch) of the C.P.A. Agreement was reached over unemployed and anti-war work in general as well as over the West Wallsend strike. By mid August these two organisations were working to set up committees in all localities, representing both parties.⁴⁶⁷ This unity "added weight to the mass sympathy" for the strike.⁴⁶⁸

The New South Wales A.L.P. Executive, however, still held firmly to its ban on united front work, and on working with the State Council. Darrell claimed that the A.L.P. Executive's actions in regard to the strike were "running true to form":

"The strike was of no consequence until the movement began to take form and develop, and then, when the wide popularity and enthusiasm with which the demands were greeted became a clear indication of the magnitude of the movement, the executive moved, not to support the movement, but to divide the trade unions and unemployed and to divide even the ranks of the unemployed themselves."

Darrell maintained - probably with considerable justification - that the A.L.P. Executive decided to jump on the bandwagon of rising discontent about the unemployed and war situations, and directed

466. W.W., 9/8/35, p. 2. This was issued as a joint statement from the A.L.P. and the C.P.A.

467. Ibid., 16/8/35, p. 4.

468. Ibid., 20/8/35, p. 4.

its leagues to become unemployed units and anti-war units, in order to prevent A.L.P. members from working with the already-established unemployed and anti-war movements. It was thus that it tried to "divide" the workers.

Darrell added that "the A.L.P. rank and file are overriding the ban of the executive" and A.L.P. members all over the state were working with the United Front against war and for unemployed demands.

"From the branches in the unemployed councils, the A.L.P. workers are assisting in every way with the strike and the unemployed demands, actually coming to the unemployed councils and the strike committee, asking for petitions and canvassing for signatures."⁴⁶⁹

Again Darrell was probably right. Sawyer, the President of the Northern Assembly of the A.L.P., declared:

"I think I may say, without fear of contradiction, that the whole membership of the Labor Party are solidly behind the strikers of West Wallsend."⁴⁷⁰

Support for the strike did not come only from unionists and A.L.P. members, but from a wide strata of society. We have already noted the support given by some clergymen. There were also a number of very representative public meetings at which support was declared. For example, the Mayors of Wickham and Carrington called public meetings in response to petitions from local residents. These meetings discussed relief workers' demands

469. R. Darrell, op. cit., pp. 61-62.

470. W.W., 13/8/35, p. 4.

for better conditions, supported the West Wallsend strikers and called for 100% increase in the dole.⁴⁷¹ A similar meeting was held at Hamilton.⁴⁷²

The amount of money donated to the strike again shows the great support. The strikers had a very efficient relief committee, and the fact that the strikers and their families did not have to go hungry undoubtedly contributed to their remaining solid for so long a time.

In the first three days of the strike over £ 70 was collected.⁴⁷³ Between July 11th and July 25th £ 290.11.3½ was given to the strike committee; the committee's expenditure over this period was £146.11.4½. The relief committee also obtained £350 worth of goods on credit from a cooperative store. The Northern Miners' Federation stood guarantor for £250 of this, and the Ironworkers' Union for £100. On August 6th the Northern Miners' Management Committee decided to levy 1½% from the wages of northern miners to support the strike.⁴⁷⁴ A month later the amount raised by this levy was £160.⁴⁷⁵ Towards the end of

471. W.W., 6/9/35, p. 4.

472. Ibid., 20/9/35, p. 4.

473. R. Darrell, op. cit., p. 59.

474. W.W., 9/8/35, p. 2. Bondy Hoare had now replaced the Communist James Jack as President of the Northern Miners. That he should support a strike with Communists among the leaders again shows how political differences were waived in this agitation.

475. W.W., 3/9/35, p. 4.

August a further £127 was collected by the strike committee, and given out to the strikers.⁴⁷⁶

Initially, the relief committee gave the strikers a cash allowance representing 25% of the difference between the value of the dole and relief work, and fully supported seventy strikers who were disbarred from the dole because of the P.I.R. It also gave out fruit, and provided soup each day for the 800 children of the strikers. By late August it was paying out 50% of the difference between the dole and relief work values.⁴⁷⁷

That the strikers supported the State Council is shown by the fact that they all made a voluntary contribution of 3d to the State Council's funds after one distribution of relief.⁴⁷⁸

As well as the public support meetings, the strikers continued to hold their own meetings through August and September.

On August 14th, 1,000 attended a strike meeting, and heard the strike committee's report on the struggle. The Workers' Weekly noted that the men were "100% solid". "In achieving this, great importance is attached to the wonderful response from workers in all parts of the state." The strike committee had decided to broaden the scope of its propaganda and organisational work, and

476. Ibid., 20/8/35, p. 4.

477. Ibid., 9/8/35, p. 2; 16/8/35, p. 4; 3/9/35, p. 4.

478. Ibid., 3/9/35, p. 4.

with the aid of the Newcastle T.H.C. Unity Committee was preparing a further leaflet "to penetrate all factories and workshops." The strike committee had gained "added weight" from the Miners' Board of Management's decision to delegate some members of the nearest miners' lodge onto the strike committee.⁴⁷⁹

Towards the end of August, the Government reversed another decision by agreeing to meet a deputation representing the strikers. The deputation (elected at the August 2nd meeting) consisted of strikers, unemployed workers, trade union leaders, clergymen and members of shire and municipal councils.

It had long been Government policy to refuse to see any delegation while men were still on strike. Though the reversal of its refusal to meet the strikers was in itself a victory for the West Wallsend men, the Government would not meet their demands in any satisfactory manner. On August 26th "one of the best meetings on record" in West Wallsend gathered to hear the deputation's report of its meeting with the Minister. The meeting unanimously agreed that the Government's reply was "very unsatisfactory", and decided to immediately intensify its activity in organising public protest meetings, and to try to arouse even more support from the workers in industry and relief workers. Two days later, the Newcastle Labor Council endorsed the decisions

479. Ibid., 20/8/35, p. 4. This was described as "the biggest meeting ever held" in West Wallsend.

of this meeting.⁴⁸⁰

The strikers immediately set about organising a mass demonstration in Newcastle for September 20th. The State Council and the District Council helped in the organisation.⁴⁸¹

On Tuesday, September 3rd, there was another mass meeting in West Wallsend. This decided to build a youth organisation, and to carry on organisational work for the Newcastle meeting. The strike committee sent a representative to Broken Hill and Wonthaggi to explain the strike; a speaker had earlier been sent to Lithgow to solicit support. Although solidarity was reportedly "the keynote" of this meeting, there were "a few disruptive individuals", so the meeting was adjourned to Friday 6th.⁴⁸²

The topic of this adjourned meeting was a resolution sent by the Killingworth branch (presumably, of the Unemployed and Relief Workers' Council) that the strike be concluded. 500 strikers met, and after a long discussion, decided by a 6 to 1 majority to continue the strike. They also expressed their complete confidence in the strike committee, and reaffirmed that they would stay out until "satisfactory terms of settlement" were arranged. They further decided to extend their activity in organising mass

480. Ibid., 30/8/35, p. 4. c.f. also R. Darrell, op. cit., p. 61.
The deputation took place on August 22nd.

481. W.W., 6/9/35, p. 1.

482. Ibid., 10/9/35, p. 4; 3/9/35, p. 4.

meetings all over the North, to culminate in the September 20th meeting at Newcastle.⁴⁸³

On Tuesday, September 10th, a further mass meeting reaffirmed the decision to continue the strike. A recommendation that demonstrations be held at the dole depots to demand special food orders was endorsed.⁴⁸⁴

The preparation for the September 20th meeting was evidently very successful, and it was supported by all the unemployed bodies in the Newcastle district. The Workers' Weekly proclaimed a "United Front Success".⁴⁸⁵

This demonstration was probably the climax of all the demonstrations of solidarity.

In less than three weeks the strike was over. On October 8th the Workers' Weekly declared that "victory was in sight" for the West Wallsend strikers.⁴⁸⁶ On October 9th, at a mass meeting of the strikers, the strike committee proposed

"that we resume work on the basis of conditions already gained, and in view of the fact that the Department is prepared to discuss the other questions in dispute when a resumption of work has taken place."

483. Ibid., 13/9/35, p. 4.

484. Ibid., 17/9/35, p. 4.

485. Ibid., 20/9/35, p. 4.

486. Ibid., 8/10/35, p. 4.

There was considerable discussion over this, some men still wanting to continue the strike, though it had already lasted more than three months. However, the men were still loyal to the strike leadership, and agreed to the recommendation.⁴⁸⁷

The strike committee's resolution is peculiarly flat, for the strikers had won a resounding victory, which they might well have shouted to the skies.⁴⁸⁸

The Government agreed not to enforce the preference clauses of the Returned Soldiers and Sailors' Preference Act on any relief work!

Thus the West Wallsend men won an immediate improvement in the working conditions not just on their job, but on jobs throughout the state. More importantly, they, mere relief workers with no acknowledged rights, had taken a stand on a matter of union principle, and had won. By forcing the Government, which was so adamant on this issue, to back down, they had shown the strength that relief workers could possess. That this preference system was withdrawn showed that relief workers had a right to, and a right to demand, at least some of the rights long established by unionists.

487. Ibid., 11/10/35, p. 4.

488. The results of the strike are given in W.W., 8/10/35, p. 4; 11/10/35, p. 4.

Other concessions won also improved the position of all relief workers, and showed a de facto recognition that relief workers had rights - among them, the right to protest or put their demands.

The strike, and the support it aroused, forced the Government to change its attitude in regard to complaints made by relief workers against the actions of, or conditions imposed by, shire and municipal councils. Formerly it had been impossible to get the Government to consider complaints made against local governing bodies. (This was partly because the Government did not want to hear grievances in general, and partly because there was no channel through which grievances could be put.) Now Mr. Main, the Chief Engineer to the Unemployment Relief Council, would receive such complaints. Moreover, he would hear them per medium of the State Council of Unemployed and Relief Workers. By this change the Government in fact conceded that relief workers had a right to be heard; the decision implied that the Government felt that relief workers might have justified grievances; by recognising the State Council, the Government conceded that the relief workers were not divided, disorganised riff-raff, but an organised force with a representative voice.

The Government also agreed to meet representatives of the State Council and of the unions with a view to reviewing the question of marginal rates on all relief works. This again conceded that relief workers' views should be heard, that their

demands might be warranted, and that perhaps relief workers had a right to some marginal payments won by unions and included in union awards.

That the strikers and their supporters had forced the Government to grant food relief to the strikers, and to meet with a deputation of strikers, were also rightly hailed as victories. These again showed how much pressure relief workers could bring to bear. Also, by granting these two demands, the Government had again been forced to concede some recognition of relief workers' right to strike. By refusing on principle to listen to any demands while men stayed out, by turning a deliberately blinded eye to all strikes, the Government had refused to recognise not only the existence of strikes, but also their right to exist. By receiving the West Wallsend deputation the Government formally recognised the strike, and recognised that the strikers had a right to put their case, as did regular unionists when they struck. By granting food relief to the strikers, the Government admitted that relief was not simply charity given out of the goodness of the Government's heart, but something to which unemployed workers had a right.

Of course, the Government did not openly admit these conclusions which I have drawn from their concessions; it is possible that it did not even see all the implications of its actions. However, these implications were inherent in the concessions granted, and relief workers could use the concessions

won by the West Wallsend strikers, and the theoretical ramifications of these concessions, as precedents when bargaining with the Government over other issues.

The strikers also won some of the immediate demands concerning conditions on the West Wallsend job. Although gains were not specified, it was noted that the Lake Macquarie Shire Council, in agreement with the Government, had agreed to "the most important of the demands"; indeed the Council "acceded to the demands of the men as far as they [could] possibly go, andagreed to back the men in their other demands on the Government."

The final success of this struggle was stimulus it gave both to the organisation of the unemployed and relief workers, especially in the North,⁴⁸⁹ and to the extension of the united front between unionists and unemployed, and between A.L.P. members and members of the unemployed and anti-war movements.

I have already noted that at the 1936 State Council Conference, Payne pointed to the West Wallsend strike as the "most notable" of the "many important struggles" that had been waged during the year. In fact, in terms of both the strikers' determination and of the concessions won, this strike was probably the 'most notable' of all relief workers' strikes in New South Wales. Though, of course, the strikers could not have won without the solidarity given by thousands of supporters, and especially

489. c.f. S.U. & R.W.C., Report of Annual Conference, 1936, p. 3.

the support shown by the unions and the Northern District A.L.P., the main weight of the action and organisation was borne by the West Wallsend men. It was they who made the decision to strike, it was they who had to hold to this decision, who had to devote their physical and moral strength to the agitation for three months. Success could not have been won without their struggle. It is almost incredible that six hundred and fifty men could win such victory.