WWI and the working class

Mick Armstrong

When the war was declared the world was engulfed by patriotic fervour. In Australia there were spontaneous pro-war demonstrations and tens of thousands rushed to enlist. Strikes were called off so as not to hurt the war effort, rioters attacked German-owned businesses and German-born workers were sacked. These attacks were soon extended from Germans and Austrians to virtually anyone seen as foreign.

While press, pulpit and academia beat the drum, ALP leaders often outdid them for chauvinism. Andrew Fisher, soon to be elected Labor Prime Minister, vowed fight to "our last man and our last shilling". Many on the left were shocked and demoralised by this stance, and by the collapse of the mainstream European feminist and pacifist organisations who openly backed the war. Patriotic fervour led the major middle class pacifist group, the 55,000-strong Australian Freedom League, to suspend its activities and practically dissolve as it did not want "to

hamper the Government in the discharge of their grave responsibility".

Only small groups such as the Australian Socialist Party (ASP), the revolutionary syndicalist Industrial Workers of the World, and socialist-inclined feminists of the Women's Peace Army proclaimed their opposition to the war. The IWW, in their inimitable style, declared:

> **"LET THOSE WHO OWN AUSTRALIA DO THE FIGHTING**
> "Put the wealthiest in the front ranks; the middle class next; follow these with politicians, lawyers, sky pilots and judges. Answer the declaration of war with the call for a GENERAL STRIKE... Don't go to Hell in order to give piratical, plutocratic parasites a bigger slice of Heaven.
> **"WORKERS OF THE WORLD UNITE! DON'T BECOME HIRED MURDERERS! DON'T JOIN THE ARMY OR NAVY!"**

The "Wobblies" spoke for a relative handful at this stage. Courage and determination were needed to stand against the

wave of chauvinism in 1914. Yet within three years, Australia was rocked by a great wave of industrial and political upheavals that were to continue into 1920. The high points were the 1917 mass strike and the massive campaigns that defeated two conscription referenda. These represented a fundamental working class challenge to the war. The Labor Party split in the face of mass unrest. Many across the political spectrum came to see revolution as inevitable.

How did this turn-around occur? To answer this we must sketch the development of the working class movement. The unions had been shattered by the defeat of the great strikes of the 1890s, and the Depression that followed. In response the official movement had embraced Arbitration and parliamentary Laborism. However after 1906 there was a rapid recovery in militancy and the growth of left groups such as the Victorian Socialist Party (VSP), and of syndicalist currents which emphasised direct action and scorned parliament.

The mining towns were large and militant centres. The 13,000 or so NSW coal miners and the 9,000 Broken Hill metal miners accounted for three-quarters of all strike days in this pre-war upsurge – and so devel-

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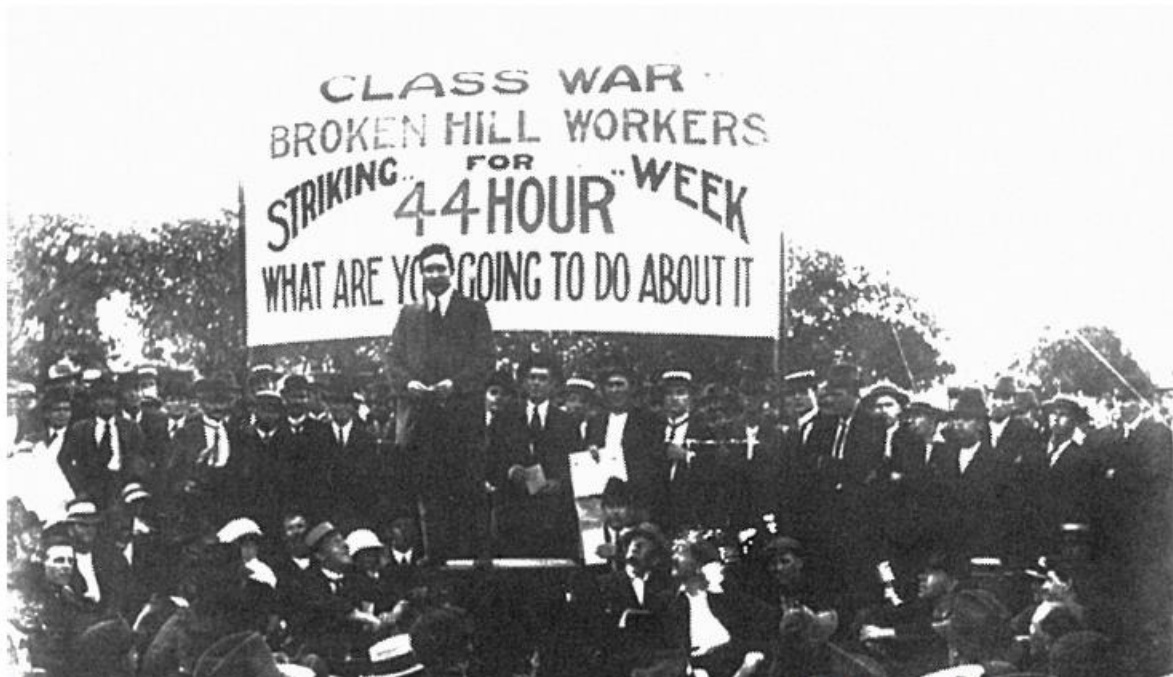

PHOTO: IWW speakout in Sydney's Domain supporting Broken Hill workers striking for a 44-hour week in 1916 (Source: Outback Archives, Broken Hill City Library).

The growing threat of conscription galvanised the organised working class across sectarian lines into an enormous mass movement.

opments in the mining centres set the pace for the rest of the country. The year 1909 saw the initial peak of the pre-war upsurge with an 18-week Newcastle coal strike and a four-month lockout of Broken Hill miners. The coal strike was savagely defeated, with five of the leaders sentenced to 18 months hard labour, including the radical socialist Peter Bowling who was sent to Goulburn jail in chains. The Broken Hill miners' strike ended more like a draw. The other high point was the 1912 Brisbane General Strike which spread through Queensland. It was led by a strike committee which became a virtual alternative government.

With the outbreak of war, levels of militancy fell sharply. The number of strikes halved by 1915. There was a high level of enlistment amongst unionists. NSW South Coast miners fought on despite the patriotic euphoria and there was a virtual mutiny by seafarers aboard the troop ship *Kanowna*

over their water allowance. Still, the overall picture was considerably subdued. If workers held back from striking to help the war effort, this didn't mean they were caught up in the chauvinist frenzy.

The general working class mood was rather one of uncertainty and confusion. Most participants in pro-war demonstrations were middle class, whereas conversely some unions stood out against the hysteria. The Australian Society of Engineers (ASE) declared: "We must remember that the German workman has had no voice in declaring war, and trust that no animosity will be shown towards him in the workshop."

Many workers undoubtedly enlisted at least in part for patriotic reasons. But there were other factors at work – a naive sense of adventure, or escape from the humdrum life on the job. Once unemployment declined and the horrors of the Western front became known, enlistments dropped off

dramatically. This was doubly the case for those with an Irish Catholic background.

Spontaneous patriotic outpourings were proving short-lived. The Labor government had to mount a massive propaganda offensive and impose draconian censorship. In late 1914 the government released a film of supposed German atrocities in Belgium. It had been shot "on location" outside the Sydney gas works! The War Precautions Act, first introduced in October 1914 and stiffened by a series of amendments during the course of the war, was used to militarise society and give the government control over the economy, the press and social life.

Most people initially expected the war to be a smashing victory – all over in a few short months. As the death toll mounted the mood became more subdued. Casualties undermined morale within the army itself. There was a wave of rioting by soldiers in army camps all across Australia in 1916.

By August 1916 recruitment had collapsed. Billy Hughes, who had replaced Fisher as Labor prime minister, began a relentless campaign for the introduction of conscription.

One symptom of the shift in mood was the fall-off in church attendance. Protestant pulpits were draped with the Union Jack, but while respectable society revelled in this jingoism, workers were increasingly repelled. Another reflection of the class divide was on the football field. At the beginning of 1916 the more middle class Australian Rules clubs such as Melbourne, Essendon and St Kilda withdrew from the competition.

Resentment was also rising over economic hardship while profiteering saw shipping profits multiply. The first sustained outbreak of unrest came on the Melbourne wharves in late 1915, culminating in a successful strike in early 1916. There was a series of local strikes in Queensland and the Northern Territory. Then from April 1916 wildcat strikes by shearers swept across much of Queensland and western NSW. Although shearers' union (AWU) officials expressed virulent opposition to the strikes, the pastoralists were forced to grant significant pay increases.

The strikes were organised by local rank and file committees in centres such as Moree, Bourke and Walgett. These independent rank and file structures were strongly influenced by IWW supporters; indeed the Sydney strike committee held its meetings in the IWW hall. Strikes for higher pay in

THE BLOOD VOTE

"Why is your face so white, Mother?
Why do you choke for breath?"
"O I have dreamt in the night, my son,
That I doomed a man to death."

"Why do you hide your hand, Mother?
And crouch above it in dread?"
"It beareth a dreadful brand, my son:
With the dead man's blood 'tis red."

"I hear his widow cry in the night,
I hear his children weep;
And always within my sight,
O God!
The dead man's blood
doth leap.

"They put the dagger into my
grasp.
It seemed but a pencil then.
I did not know it was a fiend a-gasp
For the priceless blood of men.

'They gave me the ballot paper,
The grim death-warrant of doom,
And I smugly sentenced the man to death
In that dreadful little room.

'I put it inside the Box of Blood
Nor thought of the man I'd slain,
Till at midnight came like a 'whelming
flood
God's word - and the Brand of Cain

"O little son! O my little son!
Pray God for your Mother's soul,
That the scarlet stain may be white again
In God's great Judgment Roll."

Written by W. R. Winspear, and drawn by Claude Marquet, St Andrew's Place Sydney

CONSCRIPTION BALLOT-BOX

PHOTOS/ILLUSTRATIONS: Left - anti-conscription propaganda; Above right - Archbishop Daniel Mannix (centre) (Source: Joe Harris, *The Bitter Fight: a pictorial history of the Australian labor movement*).

north Queensland meatworks, another area of strong IWW influence, were also victorious. While not as yet anti-war, the mood was increasingly critical: workers had begun to demand equality of sacrifice, for example.

Turning against the war

Then in 1916 the mood began to change sharply. Industrial grievances were now reinforced by political ones. In Easter 1916 British troops had crushed the Easter Rising in Dublin. The execution of the leaders in Dublin, and an outburst of Protestant sectarianism against the Catholic minority in Australia, turned the latter increasingly against the war. A wave of repressive laws was introduced targeting Irish Australians. In response they mobilised in their hundreds of thousands. A 100,000-strong rally at the Richmond Racecourse in November 1917 was addressed by the Catholic Archbishop of Melbourne Daniel Mannix, who in this his most radical phase, had declared that he was on the side of the workers in the "cruel war raging – it is virtually a civil war – between the workers and the employers".

It was not just Irish Australian workers who were being radicalised. The growing threat of conscription galvanised the organised working class across sectarian lines into an enormous mass movement. Workers saw conscription as undermining union organisation, and bitterly opposed the unfairness of conscripting labour when there was no conscription of capital.

Broken Hill again took the lead. Here the militants linked anti-war agitation to the miners' economic grievances. Agitation to cease paying rents till the war was over led in 1915 to a general stoppage of rent payments. The major issue the militants took up was shorter hours. In May 1915 a move to strike for a 44-hour week was defeated due to continuing pro-war sentiment. However by now the militants had cohered as a "vociferous, uncompromising...and well organised minority". By October they were on the march. The underground miners formed a separate committee, headed by leading socialists and syndicalists. They broke with the more conservative surface workers and their left officials and under the slogan: "If you want a 44 hour week, take it", they refused to work Saturday afternoons.

In July 1916, in the face of the continuing threat of conscription, the militants launched the Labor Volunteer Army (LVA).

The 2,000 draft-aged workers who enrolled in the LVA in Broken Hill pledged that:

"I will not serve as a conscript (industrial or military) and that I will resist by every means in my power any attempt to compel me or any of my comrades...to break this pledge, even though it may mean my imprisonment or death, and I take this pledge voluntarily and freely, knowing that if I break it I will be branded as a traitor to my class."

The LVA grew into a mass movement. In August 1916, after Empire loyalists physically attacked an anti-conscription meeting, 10,000 out of a total population of just 30,000 rallied to denounce them. Two leading socialist militants, Percy Brookfield and Mick Considine, were elected to parliament. The Broken Hill example spread to the capital cities, and on 4 October 1916 there was a nationwide anti-conscription stopwork.

Establishment opinion was shocked by the narrow No victory in the referendum of 28 October 1916 (1,087,557 for conscription, 1,160,033 against). Three states voted No – NSW, where the working class movement was most organised, Queensland and South Australia. Victoria saw a narrow victory for Yes, while Tasmania and WA had decisive majorities for Yes. While not a vote against the war as such, it provided an enormous boost to the anti-war movement. The tensions which had been building inside the ALP now exploded. Under intense pressure from their radicalised rank and file, the union leaders who controlled the party machine had been forced to make a stand against Hughes' attempt to impose conscription. In November 1916 Hughes and a sizeable block of MPs split away to join with the conservative opposition in a new Nationalist government.

Meanwhile the casualty figures had reached horrendous proportions. At the third battle of Ypres alone there were 38,000 Australian casualties – about one in three Australians at the front.

Workers were beginning to overcome anti-German feelings. In July Townsville unionists, who had previously banned German-born workers, now voted to work alongside them. "The only enemy they had was the capitalist," one unionist stated. In August 1917 came the first demonstrations for an *immediate* peace. All of this occurred in the face of increasingly harsh repression. The provisions of the War Precautions Act were systematically extended to target not just "enemy aliens" but also

"pacifists, unionists, radical socialists, Irish nationalists, and anti-conscriptionists of all persuasion". Military raids were carried out against the Trades Halls in Melbourne and Brisbane. The red flag was banned; the IWW was outlawed as an organisation and a hundred or so of its members imprisoned.

As the working class revolt intensified, ruling circles concluded that the social order was fundamentally threatened, and resorted to desperate measures. Governor General Sir Ronald Munro Ferguson thought the one hope was that "things are so black that the better elements of society will be drawn together in a fight against the Powers of Darkness". Society began to polarise. Elaborate plans were drawn up to suppress riots and disturbances. Secret paramilitary forces were recruited and armed with machine guns. As Andrew Moore's research revealed:

"Apart from arrangements for the deployment of artillery, infantry and light horse personnel to suppress civil disorder, two aeroplanes were to be used:
(a) to overawe rioters by their presence in the air.
(b) to co-operate with the artillery.
(c) to assist in dispersing the rioters by the use of machine guns and revolvers or by dropping bombs or hand grenades."

The leadership of these paramilitaries reads like a who's who of the Australian bourgeoisie – the heads of the major banks, company directors, judges, army generals and university professors. In Queensland alone 70,000 "respectable" middle class citizens enrolled in the ultra-right King and Empire Alliance. Yet the working class, anti-war forces had won the day.

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