

The 1949 Coal Strike

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On Monday 27 June 1949, 23,000 workers employed in the black coal mining industry began a general strike. In the seven weeks that followed Australia experienced a period that, with the exception of the 1930s depression, was one of the most bitter and agonising in her history. Because the economy was so heavily reliant on coal, drastic restrictions on the use of gas and electricity were imposed. Consequently, industry ground almost to a halt and half a million workers became unemployed. Soup kitchens—those social indicators of economic hardship and physical suffering—were once again a common sight in Sydney's industrial suburbs.

Two days after the strike commenced the Attorney General, Dr Evatt, after discussion with the Prime Minister, Ben Chifley, introduced into federal parliament the National Emergency (Coal Strike) Bill. It was rushed through both houses and became law that night. It was perhaps the most repressive piece of industrial legislation ever sponsored by a Labor government. The aim was to freeze all trade union funds intended to assist the strike; this included strike relief, paid by the Miners' Federation to its members.

The reaction on the coalfields was a mixture of shock and anger. The northern district president of the Miners' Federation, and a member of the Labor Party, Bill Crooks, told an ALP meeting: 'I find it hard to swallow that the party I've worked so hard for has brought down such callous legislation' while the words of a rank and file Lithgow miner echoed the sentiments of many when he said: 'they are hitting below the belt now. They are striking at the miner through his wife and children...it's a dirty way of fighting'. He then added: 'the miners' funds may be frozen but their blood is not'.

This determination by miners to continue the strike was strengthened when, under the provisions of the government's fund-freezing legislation, Mr Justice Foster (once a member of the radical Victorian Socialist Party) began sentencing officials of the Miners' Federation, Federated Ironworkers' Association and the Waterside Workers' Federation for refusing to hand over union funds to the Arbitration Court. Eight union

officials were imprisoned for twelve months in Long Bay gaol. Temporary martyrdom and prolonged resentment resulted.

While the prosecutions were occurring, further action to break the strike was planned. Already the federal government had launched a concerted and costly propaganda campaign. A series of full-page advertisements attacking the strike, and authorised by Chifley, appeared in all daily newspapers throughout Australia. The advertisements ran for two weeks and cost more than £25,000. On 11 July the government chartered a small plane and dropped 16,000 propaganda leaflets over the northern and western coalfields. Jack Lang commented that the government had 'bombarded the mining communities from the air as if they belonged to a hostile nation'.

Three days later, on 14 July, the Labor Party commenced its 'mission to the coalfields'. For nearly a month mining townships were inundated by federal and state Labor politicians, who urged miners at innumerable street corner meetings to return to work. They entered hostile territory. Although they spoke on behalf of a party to which many in the audience owed political allegiance, they were regarded as 'Labor' in name only. As a result, many of the meetings were marked by verbal and often physical clashes. A typical theme of the addresses was given by one Labor parliamentarian who told miners to 'accept your responsibility as citizens and accept your responsibility as Australians. Get the coal Australia needs and we will look after you'. Others, however, were less placatory. Fred Daly, a backbencher, addressed Cessnock miners in these terms: 'Why don't you gutless wonders wake up? The government has taken off its gloves. You had a taste of it with the freezing legislation. And there's plenty more where that came from if it has to be used.'

That there was 'plenty more to come' as forecast by Daly, was demonstrated by two further actions taken by the government. First, Chifley authorised, after consultation with the ACTU, the move to employ union labour to shift coal out of the northern coalfields (this coal had been declared 'black' by the Miners' Federation). In clear violation of a longstanding principle of the labour movement, railwaymen commenced the coal-lift on 5 July. With no foreseeable end to the dispute and with the economy severely dislocated, the government enacted its second and most extreme strikebreaking measure. On 27 July 1949, Chifley announced that the army

would be used to mine coal. This contravened a plank in Labor's platform but it meant that Sydney would get much needed coal. 2,500 troops commenced work in the open cuts on Monday 1 August; a week later some restrictions on the use of gas and electricity were eased.

The psychological effect on miners of these 'scabs dressed in military clothes' (as one union official described the soldiers) was significant. Miners now recognised that they were 'in battle' not with the coal owners, which many believed at the outset; it was the government—the state—that they had taken on. Senator Donald Grant (once a member of the Industrial Workers of the World) made this explicit to Cessnock miners in later July: 'I come to Cessnock' he said, 'for one reason. In the 1917 general strike the whole trade union movement was united in the fight. Everyone was behind the workers but they got beaten. Why? Because the state was against them. I have come here to tell you — you won't beat the state.' Witnessing the realities of state power in early August sharpened this realisation. At mass meetings in the second week of August a union recommendation to continue the struggle was rejected by a three to one majority.

The coal strike ended after exactly seven weeks, when miners made their way to the pits on Monday 15 August. Some were relieved; many more were despondent and bitter. Their claims had not been met, their leaders were still in gaol, and their bargaining power was broken. It was clear that their strike had been defeated. It was not so clear who the victors were.

The question which immediately comes to mind, is why the Chifley government, which two years previously proved its socialist credentials by attempting to nationalise the banks, should now violate principle and platform and conduct (what one disillusioned ALP member described as) 'the most savage strike breaking campaign in Australian history'. Underlying the government's stand during the strike, and the actions it took to break it, was the conviction that the coal strike was a communist conspiracy designed to discredit the arbitration system, disrupt the Australian economy, and destroy the Labor government. In other words, the strike was not a legitimate industrial dispute, but a political action engineered by the Communist Party. The coalfields were the battleground; coal miners were the pawns. So,

according to Arthur Calwell, at an ALP rally in the Sydney Domain: ‘this is a fight between the labour movement and the Labor government on the one side, and the communist ratbags on the other. It is a fight which the government must win’. (Indicative of both the prevailing political climate and Calwell’s visceral anti-communism, he also told this meeting that communists were ‘human scum for whom the only fit place was the concentration camp. If those people were to go to Russia Stalin wouldn’t even use them for manure’).

The readiness of Labor men to see conspiracies, and the zest and single-mindedness with which the Labor government assumed the role of strike-breaker, was partly attributable to the onset of the Cold War—an era of intense anxiety, exaggerated fears and widespread ideological conflict. However, the main factor was Labor’s awareness of the aims of the Communist Party of Australia.

In the late 1940s the Communist Party adopted policies and pursued strategies that were extreme, inflexible, aggressive and ultimately self-defeating. One of the aims was to expose and liquidate reformism (social democracy); one of the means was the politicisation of strikes. The Communist Party sought to raise workers’ political consciousness, sever their support for Labor governments and hasten their movement to the side of the Communist Party. These aims shaped the Communist Party’s approach to the coal strike. The complex reasons for the adoption of such doctrinaire policies will not be discussed here. But the upshot of these reasons was that by 1949, the Communist Party firmly believed that the time was ripe for the decisive contest with social democracy for the allegiance of the working class. It was looking for an issue that would force a confrontation with the Labor government, which in turn would reveal the anti-working class character of social democracy. A strike in the coal industry would provide that issue. The coalfields presented themselves as the most favourable front on which to mount the offensive against reformism because the industry was already riven with bitterness and discontent, because coal occupied *the* key position in the economy, and because the leading union officials were members of the Communist Party.

Although we cannot unequivocally state that communists engineered the coal strike it seems reasonable to suggest from circumstantial evidence and from a detailed study

of the strike, that the perspectives, policies, and directives of the Communist Party, which in turn shaped the attitudes and actions of their communist officials in the Miners' Federation, were instrumental in causing the strike.

However, an answer such as this—which says that the CPA put on the strike—is only half an answer because it replies to a question that is only half a question. To ask whether communists instigated the strike is the kind of orthodox question found in contemporary comments and accounts: these are necessarily influenced by the politics, ideologies, concerns and phobias of the particular period. But it also represents an approach sometimes pursued in industrial relations studies. These studies put questions and seek answers outside the whole context, and indeed, outside the traditions of industrial conflict. When applied to the 1949 coal strike this approach disregards one of the principle combatants—the miners—who are seen only as instruments manipulated by the Communist Party, to further its political objectives. It neglects that miners were already acutely class conscious (they had reason to be); that they fully understood the Marxian concept of class war, however primitive their understanding; and that, in a certain sense, they understood the roots of communism better than many member of the Communist Party. It also forgets that miners were influenced, not just by the circumstances of the 1940s, but by the circumstances of decades before, even a hundred years, before. Once these factors are remembered and related to the stand of 1949, we can see the traditional question of communist conspiracy ignores that strong element of congruence between what the Communist Party wanted and the miners' willingness to go on strike. So the remainder of this paper will examine that willingness by looking at the miners themselves: their lives, their environment and their psychology. By understanding these influences, a different perspective on the coal strike emerges.

Coal miners have perhaps been the most oppressed group of workers since the Industrial Revolution. Neglected and forgotten by society and ruthlessly exploited by the owners, coal miners acquired attitudes and patterns of behaviour that were unique in working class history. In the coalmining industry each new generation carried with it legacies of bitterness and conflict. The history of industrial relations was therefore one of unrest and turmoil, with the strike weapon used frequently. This high strike

propensity can be fully explained only by taking into account the total environment of the coal miner—the nature of his work, and the type of community in which he lived.

When miners embarked on their shift underground, they entered a different world—a world of darkness and discomfort. After being dropped down a shaft, sometimes miles deep, miners had to travel long distances in low and often dusty passages before work can start. In the pits, miners often encountered poor ventilation, stagnant water, high humidity, gas fumes, and sub-standard eating and sanitation facilities. In the NSW coalmines in the 1940s, such appalling working conditions were not quaint relics of the past. At the main colliery near Lithgow ventilation for much of the mine was entirely non-existent and thick vapours arising from near-naked bodies obscured vision. At the BHP owned John Darling colliery, which employed approximately 650 men, there were no drinking facilities and no eating-places or sanitary arrangements underground. Wallarah colliery had not changed in its 73-year existence, while in the biggest Cessnock colliery sulphur fumes were constantly present because of inadequate ventilation. Conditions at the pit-top mirrored those underground. Amenities such as change rooms, bathhouses, canteens, casualty centres and even bicycle sheds were either absent or primitive at most mines.

Coal miners lived with the constant threat of cave-ins, rock-falls and explosions. Memories of the great mining disasters of the past, which had assumed a tragic and legendary quality, were indelibly imprinted on the miners' consciousness. Time did not erase the fear of repetition. In addition the risk of minor underground accidents remained extremely high. According to retired miner, 'when I went underground in the morning I didn't know whether I was going to walk out, get carried out, or be blown out'. This anxiety was shared by women on the coalfields; one miner's wife said in 1949 that 'every time I saw an ambulance climbing the long road to our place, I turned sick inside. And that goes for all the other women in our mining township.' The presence of Partial and Disabled Miners' Associations in the coalfields were a permanent reminder of this fact in mining life—that much blood had been spilt on coal. Underground work, with its unpleasantness, commonly shared responsibilities and occupational dangers, meant that miners' ties to each other were strong. Feelings of mutual trust and dependence and a consequent sense of cooperation and solidarity characterised pit life.

Aboveground and away from the pits coalminers lived in townships that were shabby and sterile. They were communities that were testimony to society's neglect of the miners' plight. The township of Catherine Hill Bay, situated on what was then a bleak coast south of Newcastle was an isolated settlement inhabited solely by miners and their families. It consisted of rows and rows of drab cottages, products of years of backwardness and stagnation. The electric light wires went to the mine (owned by an English company), past many of the houses (also company owned) but not into them. One resident miner, married with seven children, described his living situation to a visiting newspaper reporter. 'We have to sleep with groundsheets on our bed when it rains. We haven't any bathroom, so the missus and the kids have to use a tin tub in the kitchen. And there's no running water although we're only a few miles from the water line.' In such communities it was not until the 1950s that many of the initiatives of the Joint Coal Board, established by the Chifley government, were realised.

Because of the conditions under which they worked and lived, miners acquired an almost savage militancy. This was expressed by their readiness to take strike action and in the leadership of their union. Equally important was the fact that their environment generated a psychology that was both peculiar to, and universal among, coal miners. The underground work experience, which had no real parallel, and the social deprivation of the townships, produced on the one hand a feeling of social separateness and on the other a sense of internal cohesion, and each reinforced the other. The geographical isolation of most coalfields communities intensified these feelings and sustained a deeply felt suspicion of the 'outside world'. The miner therefore saw himself as a pariah in society: attacked when on strike, forgotten when at work.

Insular and adrift from the rest of society, miners developed strong group values of loyalty to the union and solidarity in struggle. Because miners believed they were 'a people apart', a race united by a common bond of hardship and suffering, there emerged the sense of belonging to a larger community, which transcended the physical boundaries of individual mining townships. At one level this was translated into the motto 'one out, all out', which helped explain the widespread support given to general strikes in the coal industry, such as in 1949.

The psychology of miners was reinforced by continuity. With little mobility, and few alternative employment opportunities on the coalfields, sons followed their fathers into the pits, and inherited their outlooks and traditions. Miners, therefore, continued to believe that only through industrial struggle could their lot be improved and the shackles of their oppression be released. The belief in the efficacy of strike action was linked to scepticism about arbitration. As one typical rank and file miner told a reporter at the beginning of the 1949 coal strike, 'Listen, you can't sell us arbitration. We've had it. We've never got a thing without a fight and don't ever expect to'. This view was soon to conflict sharply with Chifley's uncompromising insistence that the principle of arbitration must be upheld and that union claims could only be considered by the Coal Industry Tribunal, which his government had established especially for the industry.

Finally, the tradition of industrial conflict was firmly fixed in the past and memories of cruelty, exploitation and prolonged unemployment were permanently ingrained. For most coalminers in 1949 an immediate and vivid recollection was the depression of the 1930s. It was during this period, when the few prospects of alternative jobs disappeared that the old saying 'once a miner, always a miner' assumed a harsher reality. Many miners on strike in 1949 had also participated in the traumatic sixteen-month lockout by coal owners in 1929–30. Antagonism towards government, the coal owners and authority generally, symbolised by squadrons of police batoning miners and killing one, were all confirmed, or formed, by the lockout experience. That experience moulded the adolescents of 1929 into the militants of 1949.

If we therefore view the 1949 coal strike from the perspective of the miners we can see that they were not dupes of the Communist Party, for the strike was consistent with their ideology, traditions, and behaviour. What was different was that the miners were fighting not the owners, whom they could have defeated, but the Labor Party, the government, and much of the trade union movement. The strike demonstrated that no matter how great the initial desire to strike, how strong the traditions of industrial militancy, how deep the loyalty to the union, or how widespread the suspicion of Labor governments, the miners could not beat the state. The coal strike confirmed that

challenges to the state, through a general strike, are successful only in very rare and exceptional circumstances.