

100 years since the General Strike: a milestone for the Australian labour movement

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Date : 26 May, 2017

The 1917 General Strike began with the RTBU's predecessor rail unions and became one of the most significant milestones in Australian labour history.

One hundred years on, we remember the General Strike as a triumph of solidarity, a tragedy of broken dreams, and the birth of the modern trade union movement all rolled into one.

The strike itself started over the introduction of time cards at tram workshops in Randwick and the carriage workshops at Eveleigh.

But workers' frustrations had been building for years and weren't just about time cards. The First World War had been dragging on and the people had been told to make sacrifices. Wages had been frozen and workers had been forced to work harder and longer as part of their contribution to winning the war.

But shortly after Chief Railway Commissioner James Fraser took control of the NSW railways in 1916 he broke his promise to the unions that he would hold back on making substantive changes to working conditions during the war by deciding, without any notice, to introduce time cards at Randwick and Eveleigh.

This set a match to a field of anger and resentment that was tinder dry and ready to explode. Workers were so fed up that they took unplanned wildcard action and collectively walked off the job. The Labor Council then issued an ultimatum to the Rail Commissioners to either pull the time card system, or face strike action.

When the Commissioners didn't budge, 1,100 tramway workers at Randwick and 3,000 workers at Eveleigh downed tools immediately. Other railway unions joined in, and the number of striking workers climbed to 10,000.

The sense that workers were being exploited in the name of a foreign war was not limited to the railways. Similar grievances were felt across the country – particularly in the big unionised workplaces like the mines and the wharves, and quickly the strike spread until an incredible 100,000 workers had withdrawn their labour.

These workers were supported by hundreds of thousands of family members and friends. Women's committees were formed, organising vital assistance after the Government cut social benefits to the striking workers' families.

But while the General Strike brought out a level of unity and militancy that showed that Australian trade unionism was truly a force to be reckoned with, it was also a heart-breaking point in union history.

After five weeks, the rail strike was crushed, and by the summer of 1917 all remaining strikers in other industries had also returned to work.

Workers had been threatened, strike breakers were brought in from farms and schools and the NSW Government ran a fierce propaganda campaign against the strikers, accusing them of being tools of our foreign enemies, and deliberately undermining brave Australian fighters on the front line. After the strike ended 20 unions were deregistered including the rail unions involved, and a series of loyalist unions – funded by the government - were set up in their place. Strike leaders like Chifley and Cahill were initially blacklisted and not allowed back into the rail workforce.

It took the election of a Labor state government to start the long, slow process of recovery. But the divisions created by the failed strike remained for 75 long years, right up until the amalgamations to form the RTBU in 1993.

The union movement has learned the lessons of the General Strike and we've become smarter and more sophisticated in our campaigning. But just as they were in 1917, the cards are still stacked against workers and we've got to continue to stand up for workers everywhere.

General Strike Centenary: activities and events

A 1917 General Strike Committee has been set up including retired RTBU members, Unions NSW officials, historians, academics and representatives from the AMWU, AWU, TWU, MUA and other unions affected by the strike. The committee have been working hard over the last twelve months to organise several events and activities to mark 100 years since the strike, including:

- A 35 minute documentary on the General Strike
- Staging a 1917 General Strike exhibition which will travel NSW
- The Gala Dinner on the 2nd of August, at Carriage Works Eveleigh
- Organising a steam train to Bathurst for the annual 'Light on the Hill' dinner
- Launching a play
- Creating a booklet on the 1917 General Strike

The Committee is also calling for decedents of the 1917 strikers to come forward if they have any memorabilia or personal stories.

For further information and details please contact Nick Lewocki on nick.lewocki@bigpond.com.au

Watch RTBU NSW Secretary Alex Claassens' speech on the Centenary of the General Strike: