1917: The Great Strike—an engrossing exhibition about mass walkouts in wartime Australia

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The product of collaborative work by Sydney's Carriageworks museum and the City of Sydney, *1917: The Great Strike* is an important exhibition about the historic six-week walkout by rail and tramways workers in New South Wales (NSW) during World War I.

The strike, which began over management productivity demands and in defiance of the government's repressive wartime policies, rapidly expanded to involve an estimated 100,000 workers in key industries across eastern Australia. With Australia's population only 4.9 million in 1917, it was one of the largest strikes in Australian history.

The militant unofficial general strike was part of an escalating wave of mass industrial and political action by workers internationally who were radicalised by the February Revolution in Russia and deepening hostility to the war. During 1917, workers in Britain, France, Germany, Italy, the US and elsewhere began challenging domestic war policies, while riots and mutinies exploded among British, French, Australian and New Zealand soldiers.

Australia's federal and state governments reacted viciously against strikers, denouncing them as "traitors" and "enemies of civilisation." Twenty trade unions were deregistered and workers sacked or blacklisted. Thousands of armed scabs were mobilised, one of whom shot and killed a protesting worker in Sydney a few days before rail union officials capitulated to management demands and ordered the strikers back to work.

Three days after the strike began, the *Sydney Morning Herald* declared that Australian involvement in the war "depends upon peace at home" and warned that "civil war has been drawing nearer every day." Acting NSW Premier G. W. Fuller denounced the walkout as "a rebellion against the orderly government of the community" and demanded every citizen declare "whether he is for the state or for the surrender of all authority to men who, for the time being, have lost all sense of public duty."

The exhibition, which runs until August 27 at Carriageworks—the former Eveleigh Railway Workshops and a centre of the strike—punctures the official patriotic-militarist mythology about Australian involvement in World War I and makes clear that the home-front was dominated by intense class battles.

The show has a wealth of original source material—photographs, posters, audio interviews, union flags, banners and badges, management "blacklists"—and some creative works by contemporary artists. There are references to the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), which opposed the war and, although outlawed by the government in 1916, had important support among militant workers.

1917: The Great Strike also includes a documentary shot during the strike by Arthur Charles Tinsdale, a former vaudeville entrepreneur. Originally an hour long, it was screened only once in Sydney before it was censored and banned by the NSW government.

Two surviving segments of the film were recently discovered and digitally restored and edited into a 16-minute vignette. It has footage of the mass demonstrations and marches, with workers carrying a range of handmade banners. Uniformed soldiers are seen in some marches. The film also shows the government strike-breaking operations, which involved pro-war farmers and middle-class layers, including university and wealthy private school students. Hundreds of rural strike-breakers were accommodated and fed at the Taronga Zoo and the Sydney Cricket Ground.

The NSW strike began on August 2, 1917 when some 5,700 workers at the Eveleigh workshops and Sydney's Randwick Tram Sheds struck over a new productivity "card system." Rail and tram workers had rejected management attempts in 1915 and 1916 to impose the cards—rightly viewing the system as an assault on their working conditions and democratic rights. On July 20, 1917, however, management suddenly imposed the cards on its Randwick workforce.

In the face of workers' demands for immediate strike action, the NSW Labour Council and fearful trade union officials desperately called on the rail commissioners to withdraw the cards, appealing for an "Independent Tribunal" headed by a judge to investigate.

William Ainsworth, the state secretary of the Loco Engine Drivers, Firemen and Cleaners Association and a member of the Labour Council's Defence Committee, which later betrayed the strike, told the government his union's executive had spent hours attempting to dissipate "a spirit of unrest and discontent."

The card system, he declared, was "a spark that fell into a cauldron of seething discontent and industrial impatience." Ainsworth's comments were not hyperbole.

After an initial decline in industrial action during the first year of the war, strikes by key sections of the working class, including waterside workers, shearers and meatworkers, as well as miners in Broken Hill, the Hunter Valley and on NSW's South Coast, began to rise in 1916 and 1917.

Within a week of the August 2 rail and tram walkout, about two-thirds of NSW's 28,000-strong railway workforce was on strike. Tens of thousands of workers in other industries refused to touch anything handled by strike-breakers. Estimates vary, but about 100,000 workers—miners, waterside workers, seamen and manufacturing workers—joined the strike, effectively bringing Australia's eastern states to a standstill.

The Domain, a large open park on the edge of Sydney's central business district, became a daily gathering point for striking workers and their families. On August 9, 20,000 marched to the area; a few days later the numbers swelled to over 100,000. Crowds estimated at between 100,000 and 150,000 were not unusual at the Domain during the strike, when the population of Sydney and its suburbs was about 750,000. Militant mass

demonstrations were also held in Melbourne.

The driving force behind this "cauldron of discontent" was not the union leadership, which worked feverishly to contain the movement, but rank-and-file workers. Strikers were determined to arrest the drastic decline in living standards caused by rising food prices, which had increased by almost 25 percent since the war began. They were also angered over war profiteering by some of the country's wealthiest businessmen and constant government demands that they had to "sacrifice" more and more for the war.

In 1915, more than 165,000 Australians, still caught up in patriotic fervour, joined the military. Two years later in 1917—following what became known as the "Great Slaughter" because of the hundreds of thousands of soldiers killed on Europe's battlefields—only 45,000 volunteered. Over 22,000 Australian soldiers died that year, the highest casualty rate in the country's military history.

This devastating waste of human life fuelled the growing anti-war sentiment in the working class. In fact, the rail and tram strike erupted about 10 months after Australians voted down the first of two military conscription referenda.

In line with British demands for more troops, Labor Prime Minister Billy Hughes and NSW Labor Premier William Holman, both former union leaders, called for conscription to overcome the precipitous fall in the numbers of military recruits.

Hughes, Holman and their parliamentary supporters were driven out of the Labor Party over this stance and established coalitions with the conservative National Party, billing it as the "win the war party." Hughes ruthlessly used the War Precautions Act and other draconian laws to prosecute leading anti-conscriptionists, IWW members and anyone else accused of disrupting the war effort.

Ten days before union officials betrayed the NSW rail and tram workers, Reginald Wearne, a strike-breaking cart driver carrying a load to Darling Harbour in Sydney, shot and killed Mervyn Flanagan and wounded his friend Henry Williams. Both men, and Flanagan's brother James, had shouted abuse at the cart driver. Mervyn Flanagan, his wife and their four children lived in extreme poverty.

Wearne, a well-off stock and station agent from regional NSW, was charged with felonious slaying and manslaughter. The establishment press took the side of Wearne, whose brother Walter was a well-connected National Party state MP and senior member of the extreme-right Farmers and Settlers Association.

The acting state coroner, who appointed a jury and turned the inquest into a trial, was from Wearne's home town. Wearne was found to have acted in self-defence and the charges dismissed, while Flanagan's brother and Williams were charged and found guilty of using violence and jailed for three months.

Despite mass support for the rail and tram workers, the union leadership and its so-called Defence Committee, which was dominated by Labour Council bureaucrats, made no attempt to stop the NSW government's strike-breaking operations and completely capitulated to rail management demands on September 9.

The rail and tram union leaders not only accepted the new time-card system but allowed management to demote strikers while provocatively promoting those who had remained at work.

Angry meetings of the rail and tram workers rejected the settlement and voted to remain on strike. Union officials, however, ignored these decisions. In some cases, they refused to even hold meetings and simply ordered their members back to work. While thousands of others remained on strike in NSW and nationally, the strike movement was broken up and defeated.

Without a worked-out revolutionary socialist perspective that could mobilise workers against the government, the Labor Party, the unions and the capitalist state, the strike collapsed. The Great Strike ended on 5 December, when the last group of striking watersiders in Melbourne returned to work. Scab labour replaced striking workers in coal mining, on the waterfront and in other key industries in NSW and Victoria. It was a bitter defeat.

1917: The Great Strike is a useful introduction to the historic walkout, an event ignored in high-school history studies and largely unknown to the population. The exhibition, however, is certainly not the final word on the strike or the fierce industrial battles that erupted again in 1919 and continued until 1920.

Key political aspects of the mass strike are either ignored or downplayed. Information about the pernicious role of the union leadership and workers' responses to its abject betrayal is scant. The fact that the Labor Party was unwavering in its backing for the imperialist war is not referred to.

No details are provided on the War Precautions Act, which made it an offence for anyone to encourage disloyalty to the British Empire or spread information likely to disrupt the recruitment and discipline of Australian forces. Nor is there any real information on the attitude of Labor and union leaders toward the hysterical witch-hunt and jailing in 1916 of IWW leaders on fraudulent charges of forgery, treason, felony, conspiracy and arson. In 1917, federal Labor MPs backed the even more repressive Unlawful Associations Act, after being assured it would be used only against the IWW and socialist opponents of the war.

Likewise, the exhibit draws no parallels with today's pro-war Labor and the union apparatus. Bans on goods and services handled by strikebreakers—a major component of the 1917 strike—are now illegal and punishable by massive fines and jail under the Fair Work Australia Act. Introduced by the Rudd Labor government in 2009, this legislation was unanimously endorsed by the unions and is ruthlessly used by them to prevent workers taking mass industrial action today.

Most significantly, there is no real detail on the impact of the February Revolution in Russia, which overthrew the Tsarist aristocracy and had a galvanising political impact on millions of workers all around the world. Such was the magnitude of this event and the response in the Australian working class that the NSW and Victorian Labor Party conferences were compelled to pass resolutions congratulating the Russian workers.

The NSW resolution placed the blame for the war on the "existing capitalistic system of production of profit which compels every nation constantly to seek new markets to exploit, invariably leading to a periodic clash of rival interests." It insisted that peace could only be accomplished by the "united efforts of the workers of all the countries involved."

The only reference in the exhibition to the sort of sentiments provoked by events in Russia is an excerpt from a 1987 audio interview with Edna Ryan. She was 13 years old when the rail and tram strike erupted in NSW, and joined the Communist Party of Australia during the 1920s. In 1935, however, she joined the Labor Party.

"In 1917, we would have not only been reading about [the Great Strike], we would have been reading about the Russian Revolution, and I'm quite sure that the Russian Revolution had a big impact on the working class in Australia," Ryan notes.

"We knew the soldiers were leaving the front and throwing down their arms. We wanted our boys to do this too. There was an enormous consciousness-raising of the working class."

Ryan's brief but suggestive comments make clear that the historic walkout of Australian workers in 1917 was part of a mass movement of the international working class that produced the Bolshevik Party-led October Revolution in Russia.

The *1917: The Great Strike* exhibition provides a valuable overview of how this revolutionary upsurge was reflected in Australia and an important resource for all those wanting to understand this crucial period.

Over the past two years the Australian government has spent $35 million on a pro-war, interactive exhibition, *The Spirit of Anzac Centenary*

Experience, that has been presented in 23 cities and towns across the country. By contrast, *1917: The Great Strike* is only on in Sydney and will not be shown anywhere else in Australia.

The authors also recommend:

Broken Nation: A glimpse of Australian anti-war sentiment in World War I
[6 November 2014]

Australian World War I “celebration” buries history of mass anti-war opposition
[18 April 2015]

Australian history curator Laila Ellmoos discusses 1917: The Great Strike with the WSWS
[25 August 2017]