

Australian history curator Laila Ellmoos discusses *1917: The Great Strike* with the WSWS

Richard Phillips, Cheryl Crisp
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Laila Ellmoos, one of the curators of 1917: The Great Strike, an exhibition about the historic rail and tram walkout in Australia, recently spoke with the World Socialist Web Site. Ellmoos is former president of the Professional Historians Association of NSW and presented "Scratching Sydney's Surface," FBi Radio's regular segment exploring the history of Sydney. She is the author of several books, including Our Island Home: a history of Peat Island, and numerous reviews, conference papers and public talks.

1917: The Great Strike, which provides an important overview of the mass strike involving tens of thousands of workers across Australia, is on at Carriageworks museum in Sydney until August 27. This is an edited version of our conversation with Ellmoos.

Laila Ellmoos: I work in the History Team at the City of Sydney and we're always looking at different ways to interpret our history. Of course, many things have been done on the centenary of World War I, but the events covered in this exhibition are very different and they disrupt the memory of what people generally know about the war.

In fact, the collective memory of WWI has really changed over the years. When I was younger, nobody went on the official Anzac Day marches and yet now, it's a huge phenomenon. [Anzac Day, a public holiday, venerates the first major military combat by Australian and New Zealand troops in WWI.]

A lot of WWI diggers [Australian soldiers] had pretty complicated feelings about the war and their own role in it and, contrary to much of what people have been told, were not all pro-war. Many were anti-war. There was Alec Campbell, who died a few years back, who was really anti-war and a very interesting guy.

Richard Phillips: The population has been subjected to a barrage of patriotic pro-war propaganda from the government and the media about WWI, but the class conflicts at home are buried in the official narrative. Why is it important for people to study this extraordinary strike?

LE: I think you've answered your own question. This was a very important event in our history, with resonances that we still carry around with us today.

Obviously there's still a class struggle—a divide between the haves and the have-nots and a divide between the political class and the electorate—and there are also differences.

Sydney is much more affluent now than it was in 1917 and there's no getting around the fact that the kind of poverty people were living in about 100 years ago was much worse than today. But there are also lots of parallels and you realise that once you start exploring the event.

RP: But why are these issues generally buried?

LE: I think because people like an uncomplicated line. Of course, there is the engendering of patriotism and that sort of thing—and that was very intense during the war—but there is a tendency today to reject complexity.

The world we live in—of social media, twitter and the promotion of bite-sized messages—doesn't allow or enable complexity.

Cheryl Crisp: But the response to the exhibit belies that. There is real interest in these events.

LE: Yes, you're right, there's an increasing appetite and curiosity about what happened. People do want to find out about things.

RP: Could you speak about the strike film, which is a major part of the exhibit?

LE: I used to work in film, and I'm always on the lookout for film and photographs, so when we started researching the project I contacted the National Film and Sound Archive. We looked at about eight minutes of footage. Simon Drake, from the NSFA, located the second piece in the NSFA collection, noting that there were only two segments of film. I collaborated with him to piece together the surviving fragments of film into a chronological sequence.

The film was made by Arthur Charles Tinsdale and was initially an hour long and there's a whole back story to that. He was an entrepreneur with a background in vaudeville and an independent filmmaker. Originally from Victoria, he came to Sydney in early 1917 and documented the strike as it unfolded—from beginning to end—and released the film in early October.

The film screened once in NSW [New South Wales] in a small theatre in Haymarket and was going to show in other places, including Narrabri, but the conservative state parliamentarian Walter Wearne saw an advertisement for the screening, which mentioned the death of Mervyn Flanagan. Wearne's brother had killed Flanagan—shot him through the heart—and so Walter Wearne wrote to George Fuller, the acting premier of NSW, and said this section of the film had to be removed. The next thing was the film itself was stopped.

Tinsdale wrote asking to have his film released, saying that other films were showing, and eventually, at the end of December, it was given the go-ahead, but by then it was too late. It did screen in other states but the market for the film in NSW was lost—the strike was over.

There is also footage of the strike shot by other filmmakers and so we have the 16-minute reconstruction of Tinsdale's film and three other short films. Two of those were taken at the time—one with footage from the Domain and one of strike-breakers loading cargo on a ship—and the other is from footage of the Lord Mayor's distress relief fund in October.

CC: Do you know what happened to the rest of the film?

LE: Not really. It was originally on nitrate film and so it probably deteriorated. But the fact that we've got 16 minutes, and the story about how the film came to be made, is great. I'm not complaining about that.

RP: Some of the marchers in the film are soldiers in uniform.

LE: Yes, but we don't have much detail on that. It's also noteworthy that the head of the wharf labourers union, Timothy McCristal, was a socialist, but had served in the Boer War and in the First World War. This

is another fact that disrupts the generally accepted narrative.

McCristal's wife had died and he left his 12-year-old son and went to serve in WWI. He returned and was involved in protests. He was arrested many times, including for sedition during the strike, over a speech he made in the Domain. [McCristal was wounded at Gallipoli in 1915, helped establish the Returned Soldiers No-Conscription League of Australia and was sentenced to nine months' jail for describing the King and Australian parliamentarians as "parasites" in a speech during the 1917 rail strike.]

RP: One of the banners in the film makes a reference to "Fighting for Democracy at Home." Can you explain to what extent the strikers' demands went beyond the immediate issues of the productivity time cards to the broader questions of democracy and socialism?

LE: The strike started in the NSW government railways and tramways department and spread to other industries. In terms of banners, they were mostly hand-made and created by individuals involved in the strike. Interestingly, according to one of the newspaper reports, some of the banners with the demands of the Wobblies [Industrial Workers of the World] were torn down in one of the processions.

I don't know a lot about what was happening in terms of socialism but I know that the Wobblies were a force that was most feared by the government. I'm not sure how much power they had during the strike because they were practically outlawed by that stage.

There were different levels of consciousness and you hear that in the audio interviews at the exhibition. One of the people interviewed was Edna Ryan. She is whip smart and came from a politically engaged family—they were all members of the Socialist Labour Party, which was formed in Balmain. She read the newspapers every day during the strike and was very informed about what was going on.

CC: Was this the largest strike in Australia?

LE: We say it was one of the largest. It's hard to be precise because the 1890s strikes were pretty big but the 1917 strike mobilised people across different industries and the social protests were large. In the film, you see that everyone is very well dressed and so the demonstrations were not so much a radical thing. There was a ritual of marches—for funerals, celebrations, protests—and not like the sort of situation today. There were defined routes with defined chants and songs. It was very orderly. There were violent outbursts but on the whole it was quite ordered.

RP: But these were massive demonstrations—100,000 people protesting in Sydney—that's a large proportion of the population.

LE: That's true, but keep in mind that the Domain was a popular gathering place to go.

CC: Had previous strikes been accompanied by this level of protest?

LE: That's a good question and I'm not sure I can fully answer it. The press certainly complained about the disruptions caused by the processions, but if you read the official correspondence of the authorities, they were saying that these were a safety valve. They gave people permission to be on the street because they knew that it was an accepted way of performing in public. There had been the eight-hour day processions and May Day for a number of decades. It was a complex strike, but the volume and power of these numbers was extraordinary.

RP: Is there any information about the reaction of workers here to the February 1917 Revolution in Russia?

LE: Yes, and Edna Ryan talks about the Russian Revolution and its impact. There were a few films released about the Russian Revolution—one called "Rasputin" and another called the "Russian Revolution."

Walter Wearne, who banned the rail strike film, saw the Russian Revolution film and also had it banned because he feared it would get the masses agitated. His name keeps popping up because he organised what was called the "Country Volunteers"—the strike-breakers—to come to Sydney.

RP: Some historians have suggested that the government deliberately

provoked the strike in order to smash the unions.

LE: There is no precise evidence about this, but what has to be understood is that the strike was initiated by the workers, not the union leaders. This is documented by a number of historians. Some historians even say it wasn't a general strike because it hadn't been called by the union leadership.

At that time, you also had a split Labor Party. Half the Labor leadership had been kicked out of the party because they supported conscription. A lot of people in the leadership of the Labor Party were educated and quite middle class people. You also had trade union officials, who sometimes didn't work in the industries of the workers they represented, and then you had people on the shop floor—the rank and file workers. There was a real divide. It's like today in some regards.

RP: Could you explain how the strike ended, which was not with a victory but a devastating defeat?

LE: The return to work, particularly in the railways and tramways, was the result of a capitulation by the strike defence committee. Workers were forced to sign forms when they returned, which meant they would be demoted and lose conditions. This set them in opposition to people they didn't want to work alongside—the people who had remained at work and had been promoted.

When [Labor Party leader] Jack Lang became NSW premier [1925–27], he reversed the demotions, but then National Party leader [Thomas] Bavin was elected and he restored the demotions. In 1930, Lang was re-elected and he reversed the demotions again, but with the onset of the 1930s economic depression, many rail workers lost their jobs. The bitterness over the defeat lasted a long time and it was a horrible legacy.

RP: Could you speak about the murder of Mervyn Flanagan, one of the strikers, and the repercussions?

LE: Flanagan was killed on Bridge Road in Camperdown on August 30. He was there with his brother and another man—I don't think it was a big crowd—but a strike-breaking cart was going by with Reginald Wearne and there was a to-do. There are different accounts, but Flanagan was shot through the heart and Flanagan's friend, Henry Williams, shot in the leg. Both men had been carters and draymen prior to the strike and they had a hand-to-mouth existence.

CC: Did Wearne say why he had a gun?

LE: Wearne was armed because all the strike-breakers were issued with guns as they went about their business. And even though Wearne had killed a man he was not convicted of anything. The only people that went to jail were Mervyn Flanagan's brother and Henry Williams—for three months' hard labour—because they had attempted to stop the strike-breakers. All this had severe repercussions for the Flanagan family, who lived in terrible poverty.

CC: Apart from the strike committee, was there any other support or defence organisations established for food, against evictions and other basic issues?

LE: Not really. There was a women's sub-committee, which worked through the Trades Hall and collected funds and food relief, but I haven't come across any other committees. It is important, however, to compare this to the 1929 timber workers' strike. In that strike, the women were onto these issues as soon as it started. They had learnt this lesson from the 1917 rail strike.

Sydney during these years was a really tough place—there was real poverty—and so when you had the main breadwinners out on strike for six weeks it had a big impact. Working-class families were destitute, they were starving.

CC: Could you explain the role played by the Trades and Labour Council (TLC)?

LE: It was ambivalent about the strike and the defence committee was not as effective as it could have been.

CC: Who was involved in the defence committee?

LE: I don't know that much about, it but they produced a newspaper for the first week of the strike. Some of those involved in the committee were members of the NSW parliament and there were leading trade union officials. E.J. Kavanagh, head of the TLC, was on it.

RP: Strikers were denounced as agents of Germany and white-anting the war effort etc. How were these slanders counteracted by the striking workers?

LE: Two newspapers were boycotted because of these sorts of attacks. Of course, it's hard to quantify these things if you rely on the media. The press is the press and, as we know today, this is not necessarily an accurate measure of popular opinion. Sometimes the two are falsely conflated.

If you listen to the audio interviews you'll hear that the strikers didn't feel like they were unpatriotic. They had brothers and sons at the front. There were people who were pro-war but anti-conscription, and others that were pro-war but still went on strike.



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