

The 1929–1930 miners’ lockout—a key strategic experience of the Australian working class

John Harris, Peter Symonds
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For 15 months between March 1929 and June 1930, nearly 10,000 miners in the northern coalfields of the state of New South Wales (NSW) were locked out in one of the longest and most violent class battles in Australian history. Coming on the eve of the Great Depression, the defeat of the miners dealt a major blow against the working class as it confronted mass unemployment and an onslaught on wages and conditions.

For more than four decades, beginning with the federal Hawke-Keating Labor governments (1983–1996), the class struggle has been suppressed by the trade unions in the name of making corporations “internationally competitive.” The working class has been atomised by enterprise bargaining and strike activity driven to record lows, despite continual attacks on its basic rights. And the history of the coal lockout and other major battles of the Australian working class, which always reflected and were part of class upheavals internationally, has been deliberately buried.

While the lockout has been the subject of articles, academic papers and a book, all put the defeat down to the miners themselves—courageous, but worn down and isolated after 16 months of struggle. This article will examine the critical role that the Labor Party and unions, including the Miners Federation, played, as well as that of the Communist Party of Australia (CPA), in maintaining the isolation of the locked-out miners, which finally forced them back to work on the terms of the coal barons.

The lockout took place just over a decade after the 1917 Russian Revolution and the end of World War I, which had provoked mass opposition in the Australian working class to conscription and the government’s imposition of huge war burdens on workers. In August–September 1917, 100,000 rail and tram workers stopped work for six weeks in the most populous states, NSW and Victoria—a strike that extended to other sections of militant workers on the waterfront and in the coal mines.

After a brief period of prosperity in the early 1920s, growth faltered as the Australian economy was hit by falling prices for two of its main exports—wool and wheat—amid a deepening global crisis of capitalism. Throughout the decade, unemployment remained high at around 10 percent after hundreds of thousands of demobilised soldiers returned from war-torn Europe.

Major companies reacted by seeking to cut wages and conditions, provoking a series of bitter industrial struggles. The Nationalist Party-led government of Prime Minister Stanley Bruce enacted punitive measures against strikes and the trade unions. In 1926, after a referendum to strengthen federal industrial powers was defeated, it pushed through amendments to the Crimes Act, enabling the banning of strikes in essential industries and the illegalisation of any organisation advocating “the carrying out of a seditious intention”—a move directed against the Communist Party formed in 1920.

Two major industrial disputes that lasted months took place immediately

prior to the lockout—on the waterfront and in the timber industry.

In September 1928, delegates of the Waterside Workers Federation (WWF) voted for strike action against a new award forcing workers to attend two unpaid daily pick-ups to get work on the docks. The WWF leadership rapidly capitulated and pushed through a return to work. However, clashes erupted on the waterfront after the Bruce government went on the offensive later that month, imposing a £1,000 fine on the WWF and legislating a licensing regime for workers that opened the door to the use of scab labour. In Victoria, on November 2, police opened fire on unionists picketing Port Melbourne to prevent the entry of hundreds of scabs. Four workers were injured, including Allan Whittaker who later died. The industrial unrest on the docks continued in other states for months.

In January 1929, tens of thousands of timber workers struck over an Arbitration Court ruling that reduced wages and increased the working week from 44 to 48 hours. In February, the Arbitration Court ordered a secret strike ballot of timber workers in Victoria and New South Wales, but opposition only spread. At one protest in Sydney attended by 25,000 trade unionists, 3,000 striking timber workers burned their ballot papers. Union leaders kept the strike isolated, finally forcing timber workers to return to work in June under the 48-hour week.

The lockout begins

Amid this upsurge in the class struggle, the confrontation between coal companies and miners erupted, fuelled by a downturn in the coal industry. It was centred in NSW in the country’s largest and most productive coalfields in the Hunter Valley north of Sydney. There, 20 large companies comprising the Northern Collieries Association (NCA) operated 40 mines and produced 86 percent of the region’s output.

On February 14, 1929, with the backing of the Nationalist Party state government of Premier Thomas Bavin, the NCA issued an ultimatum to 9,750 northern district miners to accept its demands within 14 days. These included a 12.5 percent wage cut, recognition of management’s unrestricted authority to hire and fire, and the forfeiture of rights to pit stoppages and pit-top meetings.

The Central Council of the Miners Federation rejected these terms. The miners were locked out on March 2, 1929, but members of other mining unions responsible for safety and maintenance were kept on the job. The council was dominated by prominent Labor Party members led by Dan Rees, who had held the Federation post of general president since 1922. He had been a member of the central executive of the NSW Labor Party

and would go on to become Labor member for the state's upper house.

Throughout the long months of the lockout, Rees and general secretary Dai Davies opposed any demand to extend the dispute. NSW miners in the southern district near Wollongong and the western district near Lithgow remained on the job as did those in other states. Miners in other northern district mines not affiliated to the NCA took no action. Those in work were levied by the unions to support the locked-out miners and supplement the limited government Food Relief—a pittance that miners had to augment by trapping rabbits, fishing, growing vegetables and other means.

Nothing was done to link the struggle of thousands of locked-out miners with other sections of the working class, including the striking timber workers, in an industrial and political offensive against the employers and the Bruce and Bavin Nationalist governments. With the dispute isolated to the northern district coal fields, coal companies in other districts ramped up production in other mines to make up for the shortfall.

At the onset of the lockout, the Australian Labor Party (ALP) was in opposition in the federal and NSW state parliaments. The party, which had mass support in the working class, had been founded nationally in 1901 on the racialist “White Australia” policy and the explicit opposition to socialism. Its role was to subordinate workers to capitalism via parliament and to integrate the trade unions into the capitalist state via the arbitration system.

The whole thrust of the Miners Federation and Labor leaders was to appeal for a compromise to the very state and federal governments that had sided with the northern district coal barons. From the outset, while opposing an immediate wage reduction, the union bureaucrats indicated that they were open to a pay cut, should an inquiry or royal commission into the industry validate employers' claims of low profits.

Union and Labor leaders participated in an endless series of conferences involving the employers and state and federal governments as well as court hearings, none of which had the slightest prospect of ending the dispute and returning miners to the pits on pre-lockout pay and conditions.

Illusions were fostered that the Bruce government was considering prosecuting the hated coal and shipping magnate John “Baron” Brown under the same repressive industrial legislation used against waterfront workers. In April, however, Bruce announced that the government would not proceed with Brown's prosecution, on the pretext that a conviction and a £1,000 fine would do nothing to end the lockout.

The Miners Federation hailed the appointment in late May of a royal commission into the coal industry by the Bruce and Bavin governments as a great advance and voted to support it, provided a union-appointed accountant would have access to the companies' books. Its report, which was published after 10 months, recommended the wholesale restructuring of the industry.

In the northern district coalfields, the Federation officials—President Thomas “Bondy” Hoare and David McNeill—were both members of the Socialist Labor Party, which was heavily influenced by the revolutionary syndicalism of the American radical Daniel De Leon. While they struck a more militant pose, Hoare and McNeill did not challenge the isolation imposed by the central Federation leadership or its continual talks with the state and federal Nationalist governments and employers.

Growing support for the Communist Party

By late May 1929, after being locked out for three months, frustration and anger among the miners were beginning to boil over. Demands for wider industrial action were increasing, including calls to withdraw safety

personnel from the closed mines. Hoare and other northern district federation officials tentatively urged the craft unions to call on their members to stop work, but backed off when challenged by Federated Engine Drivers and Firemen's Association (FEDFA) Secretary Hugh Sutherland to mount a real fight by launching a general strike. Both Sutherland and Hoare were posturing. Neither had any intention of campaigning for a general strike.

As the dispute dragged on, locked-out miners increasingly turned to the Communist Party, which had established the Militant Minority Movement (MMM) in 1928. The CPA opposed the inaction of the Federation leaders and exposed the political posturing of Labor politicians. The MMM was increasingly active in the northern coalfields, advocating for the withdrawal of safety personnel and the preparation of a general strike.

From the outset, the Communist Party had called for the formation of Councils of Action encompassing all sections of mine workers and other sections of the working class. In response to mounting pressure from below, local lodge officials, rank-and-file miners and other unionists in Cessnock set up a Council of Action, which met on May 31.

Speakers were sent to neighbouring coal mining towns to urge them to set up their own Councils of Action. Mass picketing began in early June outside the closed mines in a bid to ensure that coal was not being mined. Hundreds, and at times thousands, including women and children, took part in the pickets.

Miners often chose the hours just after dawn, and then the quiet country roads would come alive to the tread of heavy miners' boots. Carrying their crib tins, and encouraged by one of the many coalfields' bands, they would converge on the chosen mine and then persuade or threaten staff and craft unionists who were believed to be carrying on the work of locked-out miners.^[1]

Clearly sensing its grip over miners was slipping, the Federation's Central Council leaders met in mid-June and appointed a Committee of Control to clamp down on picketing. Taking aim at the CPA, the Federation Council declared that it “repudiates the formation of any other body or so-called Council of Action and instructs the members of the Federation not to recognise any such irregular or self-appointed body.”^[2]

Federal officials followed up with aggregate meetings, not only throughout the northern coalfields but in other districts in NSW and nationally, to force miners into line. At the same time, they enlisted the support of Labor parliamentarians, including state opposition leader and left-talking demagogue Jack Lang and federal deputy leader and shadow treasurer Ted Theodore, who toured the northern coal towns in July. By the end of the month, mass picketing had died down.

The impact of Stalinism on the Communist Party

The Communist Party itself had been politically disoriented and weakened by the emergence of the Stalinist bureaucracy in the Soviet Union, amid continued isolation stemming from the failure of post-World War I revolutionary struggles in Europe. Following the death of Lenin in 1924, Stalin elaborated the reactionary nationalist perspective that socialism could be built in one country. Increasingly, the Communist International or Comintern, established by Lenin and Trotsky to fight for world socialist revolution, was transformed into an instrument to serve the narrow economic and geopolitical interests of the Stalinist bureaucracy.

The CPA was established in 1920 by workers, intellectuals and others

radicalised by World War I and the Russian Revolution that established the Soviet Union—the first workers’ state. Inevitably, however, basic political and theoretical issues had yet to be clarified. Its affiliation to the Third International established by Lenin and Trotsky only occurred two years later, after it split in two over the tactics to adopt towards the Labor Party, almost immediately after being formed.

The Labor Party had responded to the formation of the Communist Party in 1921 by adopting “the socialization of industry, production, distribution and exchange” as its objective. Its purpose was to prevent radicalised workers from joining the CPA. While Labor leaders never took the “socialist objective” seriously, it encouraged the illusion among socialist-minded workers that socialism could be achieved by incremental reforms through parliament, and the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism was unnecessary.

In 1922, the Comintern advocated that the CPA seek to enter the Labor Party to win revolutionary-minded workers in its ranks and in affiliated trade unions by campaigning vigorously against the opportunism of the Labor leadership. That tactic had already been proposed by Lenin at the Second Congress of the Comintern in 1920 for the British Socialist Party, which was soon to form the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB).

CPA secretary Jock Garden, who was also secretary of the NSW Trades Hall, led the campaign to enter the Labor Party, which was narrowly passed at the ALP annual conference in June 1923. Significantly, the “left” Jack Lang bitterly opposed the CPA’s entry, declaring: “The Communists were not and never would be a part of the labour movement.” Within months, Lang had engineered a move to overturn the decision and expel known Communists from the party.

1923 also marked the establishment of the Left Opposition led by Leon Trotsky in the Soviet Union to fight the degeneration of the party under the rapidly emerging Stalinist bureaucracy. The formation of the Left Opposition coincided with the failure of the October Revolution in Germany in 1923, a failure facilitated by Stalin’s policies. What followed was a period of what Trotsky described as “right-centrist downsliding.” The Stalinist “Socialism in One Country” perspective was used to justify opportunistic relations with the trade union leadership in Britain and the bourgeois Kuomintang in China, with disastrous consequences for the revolutionary movements in those countries.

Events in Britain were followed closely in Australia, not least because many militants and socialists, including in the CPA, were British immigrants. In the lead-up to, and during, the general strike in Britain in May 1926, Stalin instructed the CPGB to give uncritical support to the General Council of the Trades Union Congress (TUC), which politically disarmed the working class as the TUC prepared to betray the mass movement and isolate striking miners. Support for the National Minority Movement within the trade unions, which the CPGB had initiated and which had swelled to nearly a million members, collapsed.

The defeat of the general strike in Britain and the isolation of the British miners’ strike undoubtedly had an impact on the CPA and the working class in Australia. Moreover, the Comintern’s orientation to the top union bureaucrats, epitomised by the slogan “All power to the [TUC] General Council,” only encouraged the opportunist scheming of CPA leader Garden within the Labor Party after it won the 1925 NSW election and Lang became premier. Following others of his group of Trades Hall Reds, Garden left the CPA in September 1926 and applied to join the ALP. He went on to become one of Lang’s key henchmen and reportedly coined the phrase “Lang is greater than Lenin.”

Jack Kavanagh, a leading Canadian Communist who had emigrated to Australia in 1925, had opposed Garden’s opportunist orientation and became CPA secretary.

The election of the Scullin Labor government

In September, the widely unpopular Bruce government was forced to call a snap election, less than a year after being re-elected, when Billy Hughes and five other Nationalist Party members crossed the floor to oppose the introduction of the Maritime Industries Bill. The Bill was designed to undermine the powers of the Federal Arbitration Commission, which Bruce believed had at times favoured the unions.

The Nationalist party had been formed in 1917 in the aftermath of the split in the Labor Party the previous year. Labor Prime Minister William “Billy” Hughes had been expelled over his attempt to impose wartime conscription. With his supporters, he fused with the right-wing Commonwealth Liberal Party to form the Nationalist Party and continued as prime minister until 1924, when Bruce took over.

With the Bruce government likely to lose the October election, the Federation leaders desperately peddled the line that a Labor government would end the misery facing locked-out miners and their families, urging “moderation” against calls by the CPA and MMM for “All Out.”

In the campaign for the October election, Labor placed the lockout front and centre, promising to reopen the mines on pre-lockout pay and conditions as its first priority in office. Theodore told the Federation leaders that miners would be back at work “within a fortnight.” The union contributed £1,000 to the ALP’s campaign with its slogans of “Vote Labor and Open the Mines” and “Vote Labor and Prosecute John Brown.”

The working class was hostile toward the Bruce government and its class-war legislation. In the wake of the defeats inflicted on timber workers and waterside workers, many workers looked to a Labor government under James Scullin to end the coalmines lockout and reverse rapidly deteriorating living conditions.

The Communist Party issued a statement on the eve of the election entitled “For a real workers’ government,” declaring that it wanted Bruce out of office and recognised that “a Labor government was the only alternative to the Nationalist government in the present circumstances.” At the same time, it warned against placing any faith in Labor, insisting that while it might offer a brief respite, it would inevitably “come out openly against the working class and in defence of the employer’s interests.”

It was not impermissible to call for a vote for Labor under conditions where broad layers of the working class regarded it as their party, and socialist-minded workers still believed it would carry out its socialisation pledge. But the demands the CPA urged workers to place on Labor leaders were limited—a 44-hour week, repeal of anti-strike laws, the legalisation of communist literature and recognition of the Soviet Union—and did nothing to expose left-talking politicians like Lang and “Red Ted” Theodore.

The election was a devastating defeat for the Nationalists. Along with three of his ministers, Bruce lost his own seat, becoming the first Australian prime minister to do so. The Labor Party won an overwhelming majority—46 out of 75 seats, but the great expectations of the working class, and miners in particular, were rapidly shattered.

Just days after the Scullin government was sworn in October 22, 1929, stocks crashed on Wall Street, marking the onset of the Great Depression and spiralling unemployment internationally. Labor reneged on all its pledges to the miners. Scullin declared he would not intervene in NSW state affairs and open the mines by force. He also abandoned any plan to prosecute Brown, using the same excuse as Bruce—that fining Brown would do nothing to end the lockout. And like Bruce, he called for a renewal of the negotiations that had repeatedly failed.

The backlash against the Labor government was rapid. Miners throughout the northern coalfields and elsewhere demanded that the Federation disaffiliate from the Labor Party and that Labor reimburse the

£1,000 donated to its election funds. At the same time, the Scullin government's refusal to take any action only encouraged the Bavin government to recruit scabs to forcefully open some mines with reduced wages.

While blustering about a general strike, the mining union leadership capitulated. In late November, a meeting of the Federation's Central Council prepared a proposal to present to the rank-and-file, urging them to accept the demanded pay cuts, avoid "petty stoppages," increase production, and permit mine managers to hire and fire at will.

While newspapers hailed the "November compromise" as the end of the lockout, miners who had already been out of work for 10 months were virtually unanimous in their opposition. Members of the Communist Party and its Militant Minority won a far more sympathetic hearing as their speakers toured the northern coalfields condemning the Federation leaders and calling for the withdrawal of safety men and strike action in working mines.

At aggregate meetings called to vote on the sell-out, top Federation leaders were met with undisguised hostility. By one account:

When it was put to Cessnock miners, for example they reacted by gasping: 'We've been sold, lock, and barrel'. The industrial correspondent for the *Newcastle Morning Herald* said of one meeting, 'No mining leaders have ever been subjected to such hostility', while at another, an unusually big meeting of about 4,000, cheers, groans and hoots punctuated the leaders' speeches. Miners shouted, 'Why didn't you come up [to the coalfields]?' and 'Why did you sell us?'.^[3]

Significant layers of the working class were being radicalised by rapidly rising unemployment, the events on the northern coalfields, the duplicity of the Scullin Labor government and the trade union leaderships, and were turning towards the Communist Party.

Support was surging among miners for the CPA and MMM, whose candidates in the election for the top Federation positions polled roughly a third of the votes. And this surge of support occurred even though the election was held before the incumbents—Dan Rees and Dai Davies—had notoriously tried to pressure miners into accepting the November compromise.

The clash at Rothbury and the death of Norman Brown

The rejection of the November compromise meant that confrontation with the Bavin government was inevitable, as it had vowed to open four mines, including the Rothbury mine, using scab labour. On December 13, a train conveying about 40 scab workers and a similar number of police arrived at Rothbury and set up camp with large tents and marquees.

Miners, who had been locked out for over nine months, isolated by Federation leaders and betrayed by the Scullin government, were determined to prevent the mine from re-opening. At meetings on December 15, workers voted to prevent scab labour working the Rothbury mine. An estimated 5,000 to 6,000 miners marched overnight from the towns of Kurri Kurri and Cessnock to the Rothbury mine, arriving on the morning of December 16.

Hundreds of miners broke through the colliery fence in an effort to confront the scabs and were violently blocked by police who used batons and then guns to force them back. In his book *Lockout*, Jim Comerford, then a 16-year-old miner and present at Rothbury, described the

aftermath:

Along the road and the fence, some miners were lying unconscious. Others were trying to get to their feet. A few were hanging on to the fence for support. Some of the bullets had found their marks... While groups of men ran back to the road and the fence to help the bashed men there, a roar of rage and defiance surged through the crowd of miners. Like something from a continually repeated chant, the cry went up: 'Guns, guns. Give us guns. Give us guns'.^[4]

Lodge officials attempted to call off the picket, but angry miners dismissed them and demanded they lead a forcible entry into the colliery. Several skirmishes took place. In the most serious incident, police again fired on the miners, forcing them back. A young miner, Norman Brown, was killed. At least ten others were injured, two seriously. Other miners who had been injured remained anonymous, fearing retribution. Newspaper claims that the miners had first fired on police were proven false by later inquiries.

The police shooting and death of Norman Brown sent shockwaves not just through the northern coalfields but the working class nationally. Miners, angered over Brown's death, immediately stopped work in the NSW southern and western districts, Victoria and Queensland. On the northern coalfields, 7,000 people attended his funeral.

In Sydney, police used batons to disperse a crowd of more than 20,000 at a demonstration where state railway union secretary E. A. Chapman called on the Scullin administration to use the army, navy and air forces to defend the miners against the police. CPA President Kavanagh, who conducted the meeting as Labour Council organiser, proposed that workers hold an all-industry one-day strike and form a workers' volunteer armed force. The motion was carried, but no strike was held.

Labor and union bureaucrats went into overdrive in a bid to contain the anger welling up among workers. According to one account: "In response to the Rothbury affair, normally moderate union officials blossomed as militants overnight. Thus, shop assistants' secretary Ernie O'Dea said: 'The persons responsible will rue this day as surely as did the people who ordered the Eureka Stockade shooting.' Others described the State Government's actions as 'fascist'. Red flags were hung, and 'The Red Flag' was sung around Australian coalfields."^[5]

The Stalinist Third Period line splits the working class

The miners had clearly demonstrated their determination to fight the lockout and resist the efforts of the coal barons to re-open the mines with scab labour. Workers more broadly had responded to the violent attack at Rothbury with strikes and protests, indicating their willingness to take militant action in defence of the miners. What was lacking, however, was the necessary political program and perspective to build a united movement against the profit system and for socialism.

Right at this point, the Comintern intervened to demand the implementation of its Third Period line adopted the previous year. This drove a wedge between Communist and Labor workers, and played directly into the hands of Labor leaders, particularly the "left" Lang in NSW.

In 1928, Stalin and the Soviet bureaucracy abruptly shifted from its opportunist line, such as its support for the TUC during the British General Strike, to ultra-leftism and the complete abandonment of the

united front tactic. Capitalism was now declared to be in ever-deepening and terminal crisis amid a continuous radicalisation of the working class. The labour and social democratic parties that had been courted by the Stalinists were denounced as “social fascists”—worse than actual fascists, because they were disguised.

Writing on Germany in 1932, where the Third Period line blocked the unification of the working class and enabled Hitler to come to power, Trotsky ridiculed the argument that the Social Democrats and the Nazis were both “fascist” because both were instruments of capitalist rule. He called for a united front of the Communist Party with Social Democrats to defend workers and their organisations against the Nazi stormtroopers, while insisting on the complete political independence of the Communist Party.

The Social Democracy, which is today the chief representative of the parliamentary-bourgeois regime, derives its support from the workers. Fascism is supported by the petty bourgeoisie. The Social Democracy without the mass organizations of the workers can have no influence. Fascism cannot entrench itself in power without annihilating the workers’ organizations... For the monopolistic bourgeoisie, the parliamentary and fascist regimes represent only different vehicles of dominion... But for both the Social Democracy and fascism, the choice of one or the other vehicle has an independent significance; more than that, for them it is a question of political life or death.^[6]

Initially, the CPA under Kavanagh did not oppose the Third Period line outright but argued that it did not apply to Australia. But in December, amid the upheaval on the northern coalfields, the Comintern intervened in the CPA, declaring it was impermissible just to criticise and expose the actions of Labor leaders such as Scullin and Lang, who, it insisted, were worse than open capitalist politicians such as Bruce and Bavin and worse than the fascists.

An open Comintern letter published in the *Workers Weekly* on December 6, declared: “In regard to the Labor Party of Australia, it must be said that it has already gone over definitively to the side of the bourgeoisie, and to support it in any way means to support the enemies of the working class.”

The letter said the CPA’s decision to call for a vote for Labor in the October federal election was “a glaring example of grave Right deviation deserving of the severest condemnation.” It declared that “the class struggle was growing keener from day to day, with a general capitalist offensive actually in full swing with the Labor Party politicians and trade union bureaucracy revealing their treacherous social fascist role as allies and agents of the capitalist State...”^[7]

The CPA was rapidly brought into line. Kavanagh and his supporters were ousted, and a pro-Moscow faction headed by Lance Sharkey and Herbert Moxon was installed. The Comintern made a further intervention at the request of Moxon, dispatching Harry Wicks, who had already proved his ruthlessness in imposing Moscow’s line in the American Communist Party. Wicks arrived in March 1930 and took over the party and its newspaper to ensure its complete subordination to the Soviet Stalinist bureaucracy.

The Third Period Line in the coal lockout

To denounce Labor as “social fascist”—akin to the fascist parties in Italy

and Germany—was to cut the CPA and its supporters off from the political ferment in Labor’s working-class base. Despite the treachery of Scullin and Theodore, significant layers of socialist-minded workers within the Labor Party still believed that “socialists” in the ALP leadership, particularly Lang, were committed to implementing socialist policies.

Lang remained NSW parliamentary opposition leader and would not become premier until the state election in October 1930. After having wholeheartedly backed Scullin and Theodore in the federal election, he was desperate to distance himself from the federal Labor government, which had blatantly betrayed the miners.

At a conference of state and federal Labor leaders convened on December 21 and 22, Lang grandstanded, declaring that the federal government should confiscate Richmond Main and Pelaw Main, near Rothbury, which he declared to be the richest mines in the world. “If I were Prime Minister fresh from the elections with a mandate to open the mines in a fortnight, I would seize them and work them under the conditions of the lawful award.”^[8]

Lang had no intention of waging a fight within the Labor Party to force the federal government to nationalise the mines and re-employ the miners on pre-lockout terms. Nor indeed, to expel those from the Labor Party like Scullin and Theodore who had shamelessly betrayed the locked-out miners and, like the Bruce government, continued to push for futile negotiations with employers to end the lockout.

On the northern coalfields, class warfare was underway. Mass picketing, which had died away in July, resumed at mines across the region. At Rothbury on December 22, the largest meeting in the coalfields’ history voted to form a labour army, known as the Labor Defence Corps, to defend the network of workers’ committees that was emerging throughout the district. On January 7, 400 ex-soldiers at Kurri Kurri endorsed the idea, and the army’s first parade was held in Cessnock, where over 1,000 members of the local miners’ lodges were given instructions in drill movements and marching discipline by returned soldiers.

The Bavin government responded to the upsurge of militancy with the large-scale deployment throughout the coal towns of police and right-wing elements—many of whom would later go on to form the fascist New Guard in 1931. Drawing on the methods used against timber workers during their strike, the police formed “flying squads” that became known as “basher gangs” to attack miners across the district.

On January 15, at a demonstration of 2,000 miners in Kurri Kurri, many of whom were members of or sympathetic to the Labor Defence Corps, basher gangs came through the town to break up the demonstration, arresting lodge officials for allegedly intimidating colliery staff during mass picketing.^[9]

In his book *The Reds*, historian Stuart Macintyre described the northern coalfields as an “occupied province on which police detachments conducted a reign of terror. Special laws forbade meetings of more than two persons. Baton charges, violent assault and arbitrary arrest became habitual.”^[10]

Left isolated by the Labor and Federation leaders, the intensity of the miners’ struggle could not be sustained indefinitely. The lockout dragged on for months. Stubbornly, the miners voted down attempt after attempt by the Federation leaders to force them back to work on the coal owners’ terms until, in late May, the aggregate meetings finally accepted defeat. The lockout ended on June 3, 1930.

The aftermath of the lockout

The militant demands of the Communist Party won support among layers of miners and the working class more broadly, particularly

unemployed workers. By mid-1930, unemployment had doubled to 21 percent and hit almost 32 percent by mid-1932, as the Australian economy slumped. The membership of the CPA, which by its own count numbered 300 in 1927, expanded to nearly 3,000 in 1934. In the same year, CPA members won the leadership of the Miners Federation—Bill Orr became its secretary and Charlie Nelson its president.

However, the CPA's denunciation of Labor Party leaders and members as "social fascists" prevented the party from making far broader inroads among socialist-minded workers who were drawn into the socialisation units that emerged within the NSW Labor Party. The genesis of the units lay in a proposal by former militants of the International Workers of the World (IWW) at a Metropolitan conference attended by Labor branch representatives in NSW in early February 1930.

Rather than let the party's "socialist objective" simply languish on the books, the former Wobblies called for "a committee to devise ways and means to propagate the first and principal platform of the party—the socialisation of industry." Lang tolerated the establishment of the socialisation units at the Easter State Conference in 1930 as a means of countering the influence of the Communist Party.

While Lang regarded the socialisation units as a useful propaganda device, many workers took the demand for "socialism in our time" seriously and flocked to them amid the mass unemployment and destitution of the Great Depression. Out of the 250 Labor branches in Sydney, 170 had socialisation units attached that were in some cases larger than the branch. At its height, the organisation's newspaper *Socialisation Call* had a circulation of 40,000. At the NSW Labor conference in 1931, the socialisation units pushed through a resolution committing the party to a "Three-Year Plan" for the nationalisation of all major industries.

Lang won the state election in October 1930 by denouncing the Scullin government's capitulation to the Bank of England's demands for wage cutting and the slashing of government programs. At the same time, he was conscious of the political threat posed by the CPA and declared, "the revolution has come... without our streets being barricaded, but in the way the Labor Movement always said it would come, by Act of Parliament."^[11]

Lang demanded that the Scullin government refuse to pay debts to the British banks unless the interest rates were reduced. In 1931, Lang supporters crossed the floor to vote with the conservative opposition, forcing Scullin to an election that Labor lost. Lang was later dismissed from office in May 1932 by NSW Governor Sir Phillip Game, on the grounds that he had illegally withheld money from the federal government. More than half a million people rallied in Sydney in opposition to Game's actions, but Lang accepted his dismissal and told workers to vote in the election, which Labor lost.

As for the socialisation units, after they had served their political purpose in countering the Communist Party and become a thorn in his side, Lang dispensed with them in 1933. Amid these political upheavals inside the Labor Party and the radicalisation of significant sections of workers, the Communist Party's ultra-left denunciations ensured that Labor remained the dominant political force in the working class.

This period also marked the beginnings of the Trotskyist movement in Australia. In the early 1930s, the disciplining of the Communist Party by the Comintern led to a wave of expulsions, including those who had opposed the Third Period line. The Workers Party of Australia (Left Opposition) was formed in 1933 and supported Leon Trotsky's call for the building of a new International in the wake of Hitler coming to power as a result of Stalin's disastrous ultra-left policies. The party became the Australian section of the Fourth International, established in 1938.

Capitalism is again in a deepening crisis today, plunging humanity into a catastrophic world war, which has already opened up in Ukraine and the Middle East and looms in Asia amid the massive US-led military build-up

against China. The working class internationally is already engaged in industrial battles as the ruling classes seek to impose the burden of economic crisis and war on workers. Australia is no exception. The working class has a long history of militancy and class battles on the scale of the miners' lockout will erupt again. As it was in the 1920s and 1930s, the critical issue is one of political perspective and the building of a revolutionary party, based on the entire heritage of the socialist movement, to lead the struggle to abolish capitalism.

Miriam Dixson, "Stubborn Resistance: The Northern New South Wales Miners' Lockout of 1929-30", *Labour History No. 24, Strikes: Studies in Twentieth Century Australian Social History* (1973), pp.134-5.

Jim Comerford, *Lockout*, CFMEU Mining and Energy, Sydney, 2006, p.214.

Dixson (1973), pp.137-38.

Comerford, p.331.

Miriam Dixson, "Rothbury", *Labour History, No. 17* (Oct., 1969), p.21.

Leon Trotsky, *Germany 1931-1932*, New Park Publications, London, p.64.

Workers Weekly, December 6, 1929 p.3.

Dixon (1969), p.23.

Ibid. p.25.

Stuart MacIntyre, *The Reds*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1998, pp.156-157.

The Historical and International Foundations of the Socialist Equality Party (Australia), Mehring Books, 2010, p.41.

[1] Miriam Dixson, "Stubborn Resistance: The Northern New South Wales Miners' Lockout of 1929-30", *Labour History No. 24, Strikes: Studies in Twentieth Century Australian Social History* (1973), pp.134-5.

[2] Jim Comerford, *Lockout*, CFMEU Mining and Energy, Sydney, 2006, p.214.

[3] Dixson (1973), pp.137-38.

[4] Comerford, p.331.

[5] Miriam Dixson, "Rothbury", *Labour History, No. 17* (Oct., 1969), p.21.

[6] Leon Trotsky, *Germany 1931-1932*, New Park Publications, London, p.64.

[7] *Workers Weekly*, December 6, 1929 p.3.

[8] Dixon (1969), p.23.

[9] Ibid. p.25.

[10] Stuart MacIntyre, *The Reds*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1998, pp.156-157.

[11] *The Historical and International Foundations of the Socialist Equality Party (Australia)*, Mehring Books, 2010, p.41.



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