

Politics and meaning: Melbourne's Eight Hours Day and Anzac Day, 1928-1935

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The public commemoration of particular days can have an impact on public consciousness. This article considers the commemoration of Anzac Day and the Eight Hours Day during the Great Depression. It explores how these days were used by Trades Hall, the Australian Labor Party, and the Returned Soldiers' and Sailors' Imperial League of Australia to perpetuate political agendas. It also considers the contestation of these days by various groups, including the Communist Party; women; the unemployed, and the Movement Against War and Fascism; and how the commemoration of the days responded to, and was shaped by, this contestation.

You people in Australia haven't grown up yet. You think the Melbourne Cup is the most important thing in the world.

When Rudyard Kipling said this to Banjo Paterson, he was commenting on the fact that Australia prior to the First World War was yet to celebrate a public holiday of any national significance.¹ The Melbourne Cup holiday was, arguably, the most important public holiday on the calendar. Perhaps the closest to a national day was Empire Day, the celebration of which was inconsistent and wracked with divisions.² Wattle Days were important symbols of nationalism celebrated in schools, but far less significant in the

1 Cited in Ken Inglis, 'Australia Day' *Historical Studies* 13 (49) October 1967, p. 21.

2 Stewart Firth and Jeanette Hoorn, 'From Empire Day to cracker night' in P. Spearritt and D. Walker (eds) *Australian popular culture* George Allen and Unwin, North Sydney, 1979, pp. 17-38.

broader community.³ For Kipling this was a sign of the fact that Australia had not yet come of age; it had no day around which it could rally its people.⁴

Rudyard Kipling was, of course, an ardent imperialist, and for him the celebration of public days was naturally tied up in the framework nation and empire. But he raises a point worth considering. Public holidays do tell us something about the society in which they are commemorated. Some days are privileged on the calendar, and some aren't. The days that are commemorated, and how they are commemorated, can change over the course of time. Indeed, the Melbourne Cup holiday is not celebrated today the way it was in pre-war Australia. It has shifted in national importance. One could say it has been demoted, while others—such as Anzac Day and Australia Day—have risen in significance. So what is it we can learn from the commemoration of public holidays?

This study examines public holidays commemorated during a time of deep economic crisis. I have chosen two days with different historical and political origins: the Eight Hours Day—today known as Labour Day⁵—strongly tied to the labour movement; and Anzac Day, the day that commemorates Australian involvement in the First World War and Gallipoli in particular. One, a festival of labour; the other, the most important nationalist day on the calendar. I will look at how these days were influenced and shaped by political agendas during the Great Depression.

Public holidays can play an important role in shaping people's views and perceptions about the past and the present.⁶ The privileging of certain days on the calendar as a state-sanctioned day of rest celebrated every year, in and of itself privileges certain ideas and values in society. The placing of a holiday on the calendar creates something for us to remember, and the lack of such a day helps us forget. It is no accident that Anzac Day is celebrated on 25 April, but 23 August passes unnoticed. The latter date marks the beginning of the Gurindji Strike in 1966, also known as the Wave Hill Walk-Off, and is a date of seminal importance in the struggle for Aboriginal rights. But while we are encouraged to remember the symbolic birth of a nation through blood sacrifice at Gallipoli on 25 April, we are encouraged to forget the on-going dispossession, marginalisation and oppression of Aboriginal people in Australia, and especially the struggles they have waged.

Much work on public memory in Australia has focussed on how it represents a response to people's needs, especially their grief and mourning, and has been shaped by vehicles such

3 Libby Robin, 'Nationalising nature: wattle days in Australia' *Journal of Australian Studies* 72, 2002, pp. 13-25.

4 Inglis, 'Australia Day', p. 21.

5 For most of the period in this study, the official title was the Eight Hours Day; this was changed to Labour Day in 1935.

6 Matthew Dennis *Red, white, and blue letter days: an American calendar* Cornell University Press, New York, 2002, p. 1.

as monuments, museums and commemorative days.⁷ Ken Inglis has explored how the construction of monuments and memorials was informed by grieving communities and how it shaped the Anzac tradition,⁸ and Joy Damousi has explored how relatives of deceased soldiers and returned soldiers themselves negotiated grief and mourning through a variety outlets including commemoration.⁹ However, with this study I put forward a different way of approaching the question of public memory. I examine how public memory was contested by contemporary politics; how it was subjected to and its commemoration shaped by political conflicts and clashes. Public memory does not exist in a social, political and historical vacuum; how and what is retained or left out of public memory depends on the social forces at play. The construction and maintenance of these things requires the conscious intervention of people and groups, who bring with them agendas of their own.

This study will focus on how the shifting social and political terrain of Melbourne during the Great Depression impacted on the organisation of commemorative days. Anzac Day included quasi-religious ceremonies that marked it out as particularly sacred and important. Similarly, the historic Eight Hours Day rituals carried with them a certain weight: the regular march of thousands of unionists through Melbourne, and in particular through the business section of the city, was an important show of strength for the labour movement. The nature of the rituals contained specific messages about the past and present that were intended to have an impact on the people participating as well watching.

These rituals gave people the opportunity to participate in history.¹⁰ A march of five thousand unionists on the Eight Hours Day in 1929 provided an opportunity for people to think about and support an important industrial conflict. The timber strike of 1929 was seen as a battle for the whole working class. It began in response to an award that cut wages and conditions in the industry, and was thought of by working people as the start of a more generalised attack on their living conditions. The rituals were thus not only for the unionists who marched, but for spectators as well: the *Sun* reported 'large crowds' of people lined crowded streets to watch the procession.¹¹ Even in years when the political situation was not so tumultuous, the nature of the event as a festival of labour could imbue marchers and spectators with a sense of pride in their identity as working class people with a long history of struggle. These events gave the participants a sense of having a stake in

7 For example, see Marilyn Lake, (ed) *Memory, monuments and museums: the past in the present* Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 2006.

8 Ken Inglis *Sacred places: war memorial in the Australian landscape* Miegunyah Press, Carlton, 1998.

9 Joy Damousi *Labour of loss: memory, mourning and wartime bereavement in Australia* Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 1999.

10 Dennis *Red, white, and blue letter days*, p. 1.

11 '4,000 march in the eight hours procession' *Sun* 19 March 1929, p. 1.

history, or at least in a particular version of history, as they played a role in the creation or perpetuation of events and ideas.¹²

The sense of having a stake in ‘history’ is important, but exactly what constitutes that history is neither automatic nor constant and involves the intervention of powerful forces. The perpetuation of these public holidays depended on a high level of organised support. Anzac Day was a day that featured many varied and elaborate rituals, perhaps the most significant of which was the march through the city to the Exhibition Building, which attracted no less than 20 000 people in any given year between 1928 and 1935. It required a high level of forethought and prior organising. Even the much smaller Eight Hours Day included events that needed significant organisation and it was through this process that the days came to be vehicles for particular political agendas.

As I will demonstrate below, the Eight Hours Day was not simply a celebration of the working class movement. Rather, by the 1920s it was a vehicle of the Australian Labor Party (ALP) and the Victorian Trades Hall. These organisations used the Eight Hours Day to promote a particular vision for the trade union movement that centred around parliamentary reform. How the day was organised—and indeed whether it was held at all—was highly dependant on the interests of these organisations. Between the years 1930 and 1932 the Eight Hours Day march was suspended in Melbourne, the procession replaced with a picnic. Such decisions were based on their political convenience for Trades Hall and the ALP. Anzac Day went through a similar process, with its conservative messages woven into the fabric of the celebrations by the preparation and organisation of the Returned Sailors’ and Soldiers’ Imperial League of Australia (RSSILA).

Labour, ritual and ideology in Melbourne’s Eight Hours Day

On 18 March 1929, on the eve of the Great Depression, around five thousand unionists marched through the streets of Melbourne. It was a year of battle for Victoria’s working class: the timber strike had been going on since January; the mood was combative, and throngs of spectators lined the streets. The timber workers’ banners carried defiant slogans, challenging the arbitration court and demanding, ‘Not a minute on the day, not a penny off the pay’, and warning other unionists ‘If we lose you are next’. Unionists sang along to tunes played by marching bands, including ‘Solidarity forever’ and ‘We’ll hang Judge Lukin on a sour apple tree.’ It took the procession over forty minutes to pass. This Eight Hours Day was one filled with anger, defiance and a sense of working class solidarity.¹³

The Eight Hours Day was the only day celebrated on the Victorian calendar that recognised the labour movement. It was a day in which the labour movement was recognised by the state, and thus could be mobilised as a site of protest in times of industrial unrest. But it was always fraught with contradictions: state recognition brought

12 Dennis *Red, white, and blue letter days*, p. 1.

13 ‘Strike slogans feature of Labor Day march’ *Sun* 19 March 1929, p. 12.

with it for the organisers concerns about respectability and proper behaviour, and involved a constant negotiation between the forces of moderation and the desire to protest.

The Eight Hours Day, as its name suggests, was won as part of the struggle for the eight hours working day in Victoria. On 21 April 1856, the Victorian Operative Stone Masons' Society succeeded in winning the eight hours objective, making Victoria the first place in the world where a whole trade won the right to restrict their working day to eight hours. The first march took place in Melbourne on 15 May 1856. Every year thereafter it became a tradition to march in celebration of the eight hour day, until it was enshrined in law as a public holiday in 1879.¹⁴ The workers' officially sanctioned day soon became 'the most characteristic and important of all Australian working class festivals.'¹⁵

The Eight Hours Day had its zenith in the period before the First World War. In the 1890s, when May Day became significant on the international calendar, it did not have the same impact in Victoria, where labour already had its own day enshrined in law.¹⁶ Prior to the First World War, the Eight Hours Day in Victoria (and around Australia, although celebrated on different days) could mobilise thousands of workers. In the years preceding the outbreak of war, numbers in excess of ten thousand marchers were common. Thousands more lined the street to watch.¹⁷

The celebrations involved important ceremonies and rituals. These began with a march from Trades Hall through the city. The route was altered repeatedly throughout the years, depending in particular on where the procession aimed to conclude, but it always involved a march through the central business district. This was an important display of labour's strength to the business owners of the city. However, after the conclusion of the march, the day moved on to a community picnic. Over time, this picnic turned into an elaborate carnival. Thus the day began with a show of strength and ended with leisure and recreation.

From the end of the First World War, there was a notable decline in the celebration of the Eight Hours Day. In the early 1920s, the Eight Hours Anniversary and Labor Day Committee—which organised the rally—conducted a survey that found the bulk of unions had experienced a decline in participation since the First World War. In 1922, less than five and a half thousand unionists marched, and the decline continued throughout the 1920s.¹⁸ Partially as a result of this decline, in 1925 the organisation of the day was taken

14 'How labour day holiday was won' *National Transport Worker* 7 (1) March 1988, pp. 5-7.

15 Robin Gollan *Radical working class politics: a study of Eastern Australia 1850-1910* Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1976, p. 72.

16 Philip S. Foner, *May Day: a short history of the international workers' holiday 1886-1986*, International Publishers, New York, 1986, p. 64.

17 Andrew Reeves and Ann Stevens *Badges of labour, banners of pride: aspects of working class celebration* Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences and Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1985.

18 Eight Hours Day documents and correspondence 1921-1930, undated circular from Eight Hours Anniversary and Labor Day Committee, Australian Tramways and Motor Omnibus Employees' Association Papers, University of Melbourne Archives.

over by the Victorian Trades Hall Council (VTHC), through its new Eight Hours Committee (EHC).¹⁹

Union leaders tended to blame rank and file unionists. However, as Barbara Webster has pointed out with regard to the Rockhampton celebrations, this was an excuse for the fact that unions did less to mobilise people for the day, largely because of tensions in the labour movement.²⁰ A similar dynamic can be seen in Melbourne. For example, in 1927 the Australian Railways' Union (ARU) included in their newspaper an article condemning their membership for not attending the procession in large numbers, even though it appears they did little to mobilise for the march. The article criticises the organisation of the day by arguing that business interests dominated the procession, which indicates that the union was dubious about its purpose.²¹ Furthermore, the Eight Hours Committee minutes suggest they had not marched the year before, and did not seem to take particular interest in mobilising for the procession in 1927.²² Thus, even though union leaders were quick to blame their membership, it appears as though less and less effort was put into convincing them to attend because of disagreements about the nature of the day.

Hence the context for this study is one of longer term decline, which would eventually culminate in the Eight Hours Day being subsumed into the Moomba festivities in the mid-1950s. The period in this study provides a snapshot of that longer term decline. On the one hand, the procession attendance was much smaller than at the height of the pre-war period, yet at the same time the day continued to mobilise thousands of unionists to march, as well as attracting many spectators.

Compromising the Eight Hours Day

Officially-ordained labour days arise from complex negotiations. In Australia and abroad, such occasions were legally recognized by the state, yet at the same time this recognition was only won through ongoing working class struggle. Their position was thus always somewhat precarious, having to balance the fact that they were celebrating protest and struggle, while needing to observe their official status and the responsibility imposed by legal recognition.²³

19 Eight Hour Committee Minutes 1917-1925, 19 August 1925, p. 377, Victorian Trades Hall Papers, University of Melbourne Archives.

20 Barbara Webster, 'Celebrating the "great boon": eight hour day and early labour day in Rockhampton, 1909-1929' in Julie Kimber and Peter Love (eds) *The time of their lives: the eight hour day and working life* Australian Society for the Study of Labour History, Melbourne, 2007, pp. 48-60.

21 '8 Hours Day.—make May 1 better' *Railways' Union Gazette* 11 April 1927, p. 5. This is the only article that appears in the ARU paper about the Eight Hours Day in 1927, and it appears after the event.

22 Eight Hours Committee Minutes 1926-1930, 5 January 1927, p.72, Victorian Trades Hall Papers, University of Melbourne Archives. The ARU agreed to participate, but would not guarantee ticket sales.

23 Michael Kazin and Steven J. Ross, 'America's Labor Day: the dilemma of a workers' celebration' *Journal of American History* 78 (4) No. 4, March 1992, pp.1294-1299.

This was played out in Victoria in the negotiations over the date of the celebration itself. The need for official support meant keeping parliament and business on side. At the same time, the mere existence of a day which held as its core values those of working class struggle was suspect to this same group. Clearly the celebration of the Eight Hours Day was considered less important to government and business than other special days. Traditionally celebrated on or near 21 April, during the 1920s and 1930s the Eight Hours Day found itself demoted in importance compared to Anzac Day on 25 April.²⁴ Even a change in horse racing laws meant that in 1930 the organisers had to negotiate with the Moonee Valley Racing Club around the preferred dates for its racing festivals. The interests of racing proved more powerful, so the organisers decided to move the Eight Hours celebration.²⁵

The mere existence of the day was often enough to elicit outrage from the conservative press. Even in the period of its decline, the day was often denounced in attempts to undermine its significance as the day on which working class struggle was honoured. In 1929, while the more working class-oriented *Sun* newspaper had glowing reports of the day, the *Age* reported it as ‘not very impressive,’ and lacking in ‘splendor and enthusiasm.’²⁶ The *Argus*, however, could not contain its outrage:

Someone made an attempt to impersonate Judge Lukin on the bench [of the Arbitration Court]. The figure, lifted on a lorry, was perusing what appeared to be a copy of ‘The Argus’ and beneath it were written the words, ‘£70 a week, hours 10 to 4, family nil.’ The exhibit was statistically inaccurate and in gross bad taste. The promoters did not stop at the one exhibit...Anything further removed from the well-known slogan of former days—‘Defence, not defiance’—it would be hard to imagine. Six mounted troopers led the way and cleared the path for this incitement to disorder.²⁷

At the same time as stressing the small turnout, as it did in 1934, the *Argus* emphasised the ‘offensive’ slogans carried by radical elements.²⁸ The open denunciations of the *Argus*, as well as the subtle down-playing of the day by the *Age*, indicate how unsettling the mere existence of a day that celebrated the labour movement could be to business interests.

As Dennis and other historians have demonstrated with regard to the United States, the balancing act between status and protest proved difficult for the union leaders who organised the day’s celebrations.²⁹ Inevitably the precarious balance tended to tip towards

24 For example, see Eight Hour Committee Minutes 1917-1925, 6 April 1921, p.144.

25 Eight Hour Committee 1926-1930, 27 November 1929, p.110.

26 ‘Eight Hours celebrations’ *The Age* 19 March 1929, p. 9.

27 ‘Eight Hours Day: procession through city’ *Argus* 19 March 1929, p. 7.

28 ‘Labour Day march: procession unimpressive’ *Argus* 20 March 1934, p. 7.

29 Dennis *Red, white, and blue letter days* pp. 240-255; Kazin and Ross, ‘America’s Labor Day’, pp. 1296-1323.

respectability, as the union leaders considered their career prospects. These concerns played out in the celebration of Labor Day through the muting of class-based sentiments of hostility, the promotion of patriotism, and a depoliticized carnival atmosphere. In Melbourne, many of the same dynamics essentially underpinned the celebrations of the Eight Hours Day.³⁰

The Eight Hours Day celebrations became a factor in the development of permanent peak union bodies. As these bodies, in turn, tended to dominate the organisation of the Eight Hours Day, the festivities reflected the interests of the leaders in the labour movement and of the peak union bodies. Moreover, from the 1890s, these interests—and hence the Eight Hours Day—became increasingly tied to the emergent Australian Labor Party.³¹ The ALP was established in 1891 and by 1910 had formed a majority government in the Federal Parliament. The Hogan Labor Government was in power for most of the period from 1927 until 1932. The ALP had its base in the union bureaucracy, and for most of the period since the ALP's inception, the labour movement has been tied to its program of parliamentary reformism.

This growing relationship with the ALP was demonstrated by the attitude of the organisers of the Eight Hours Day. Even prior to 1926, there were clear allegiances to the ALP within the organising committee, but these became especially pronounced after organisation was taken over by VTHC. Its elected members during the period of this study included such ALP personalities as Jean Daley. In 1927, the ALP was openly called upon to use the day as part of their State election campaign.³² The parliamentary ALP was toasted at the Eight Hours Banquet, which occurred the Saturday before the Eight Hours Day, and on occasion parliamentary leaders were invited to make toasts to be broadcast on Melbourne's 3LO.³³ Indeed, increasingly the day was viewed as *Labor's* day as much as it was labour's day. More radical workers, such as socialists, syndicalists and anarchists, tended to celebrate May Day rather than the Eight Hours Day.³⁴

From 1928 until 1935, definite concessions were made in response to the pressure of maintaining good relations with the ruling elite. From 1926 onwards, trade displays by private companies were allowed to participate in the parade, and private donations were also accepted, notably from the *Herald* newspaper.³⁵ The presence of trade displays with

30 There were important differences, however. The classless nature of the parade was not so strong in Australia. Although concessions were made to business—such as the allowance of company stalls and floats—there was still a strong element of class hostility embodied in the Day. The patriotism that dominated the US celebrations had nowhere near as much influence in Australia.

31 Webster, 'Celebrating the "great boon"', pp. 45-47.

32 Eight Hours Committee Minutes 1926-1930, 21 January 1927, p. 56.

33 In 1929, a federal election year, ALP leader Scullin was invited to do the premiere toast of the evening, to 'The Day We Celebrate,' with special arrangements to have the speech broadcast. Eight Hours Committee Minutes 1926-1930, 7 February 1929, p.104.

34 Foner *May Day*, p. 64.

35 Eight Hours Committee Minutes 1926-1930, 2 March 1926, p. 31.

advertising for private companies did incite some controversy. A 1928 survey of trade unions found a minority of unions explicitly opposed the presence of company trade displays.³⁶ These competed with workers' displays, which were seen as expressions of pride in one's trade, especially in highly skilled industries. Workers' displays were a real marker of working class culture. The presence of trade displays that explicitly advertised private firms was seen to undermine the working class nature of the celebration.³⁷ The organisers of Melbourne's event not only *allowed* the presence of these company trade displays and floats from 1926, but also *encouraged* displays that promoted Australian-made products.³⁸ Although protests from unions did result in the banning of company displays in 1934, this decision was overturned in 1935.³⁹ Thus one aim of the day became to persuade spectators and participants to buy Australian companies' goods, which encouraged nationalist identifications rather than class ones.

During this period the celebrations themselves reflected the compromised nature of the day. In the morning, the march represented workers' power and the historic gains resulting from working class mobilisations. This was followed in the afternoon by a carnival or picnic where leisure pursuits were the focus. Any political protests that may have been part of the march were thus subsumed and contained. The 1929 march and the presence of the timber workers demonstrated this.

The timber strike had brought about a massive cleavage in society and was broadly seen by working people as a battle for the whole working class.⁴⁰ The Eight Hours Day came after almost two months of the strike, and the march was an opportunity for the timber workers to bring their struggle to the streets of Melbourne, and for others to show support by their physical presence as observers or marchers. It was this procession that sparked the *Argus*' charges of 'incitement to disorder.' But after this demonstration of working class strength, the marchers were ushered off to the Eight Hours Day carnival, in which the main items of interest were sports competitions and callisthenics displays.

These compromises, as well as the day's ties with the ALP, brought heavy criticisms from more radical sections of the labour movement. The experience of ALP governments at both federal and State levels raised questions as to whether the Eight Hours Day—which celebrated the historic achievements of the working class—should really be tied to parliamentary parties which, when in government, often mounted attacks on working class living standards. This was particularly the case in the Great Depression, when ALP governments at State and federal level attacked the minimum wage, provided only meagre assistance for the ever-growing levels of unemployed and cut public spending. These

36 Eight Hours Committee Minutes 1926-1930, 9 January 1929, p. 97.

37 Webster, 'Celebrating the "great boon"', pp. 45-47.

38 Eight Hours Committee Minutes 1926-1930, 2 March 1926, p. 31.

39 'Labour Day march: procession unimpressive' *Argus* 20 March 1934, p. 7.

40 L.J. Louis *Trade unions and the depression: a study of Victoria 1930-1932* Canberra, Australian National University Press, 1968, pp. 12-13.

attacks were epitomised by the 1931 Premiers' Plan. Given that the Eight Hours Day was supposed to celebrate the improvement of wages, hours and conditions for workers, it was confusing to celebrate the same governments which were attacking these gains.

The Australian Railways' Union (ARU) and the Billposters' Union both periodically refused to be part of the Eight Hours Day proceedings. The Eight Hours Committee minute books also alluded to a growing number of unions that were unwilling to participate in the march throughout the late 1920s.⁴¹ The ARU in particular had a history of opposing ALP policy, and, at times, the ALP itself. Its affiliation to the ALP was suspended on a number of occasions for defying ALP policy. Other radical organisations were also highly critical of the Eight Hours Day's promotion of the ALP. The Communist Party, established in 1920, made a point of routinely denouncing Eight Hours Day celebrations in its newspaper, the *Workers' Weekly*. The Communist Party remained a small organisation throughout the 1920s. During the Depression, it experienced a surge of growth, having around 3000 members by 1935. However, even this growth understates its influence, gained through its work in organising the unemployed and its intervention into the trade union movement.⁴² In 1928, it reported:

Preceded by the usual guzzle and gorge [the Eight Hours banquet], last week's 8-hour celebration developed into a 'jolly good fellows' outfit for high dignitaries, in whose plans, of course, no provision was made for the unemployed... There is a strong resentment against the sabotage of the heads [VTHC organisers], and disgust at the way the manufacturers have been allowed to thieve the day that should celebrate a working class victory.⁴³

Contesting the Eight Hours Day

The compromised nature of the celebrations did not seem to endear it to prospective participants. From the 1920s, there was a noticeable slide in participation in the march—historically the main event of the day—although there was a small rise in 1929 on the occasion of the timber strike, and again in 1935, the centenary of Australian trade unionism.

In 1930, the organisers of the Eight Hours Day events decided to cancel the procession through the city. Instead, a carnival and sports show was held at the Flemington Showgrounds, which ran from the morning into the early evening and proved a reasonable profit-maker for the Eight Hours Committee. For the next three years, there would be no procession on the Eight Hours Day and the carnival was extended to compensate for this. Neither the EHC nor Trades Hall minutes record why the procession was abandoned,

41 Eight Hours Committee Minutes 1926-1930, 15 February 1928, p. 84.

42 Robin Gollan, 'Some consequences of the depression' *Labour History* No.17, 1970, pp. 185-6.

43 'Melbourne 8 Hour Day—a hollow mockery' *Workers' Weekly* 6 April 1928, p. 3.

although VTHC indicated that it wanted the day to be more of a fundraiser.⁴⁴ Undoubtedly, declining numbers were a consideration, but given that there had been a sharp spike in participation around the timber strike in 1929, it suggests there might have been worries that the Day could have been used to protest against growing unemployment.

The cancellation of the procession represented a radical change. The procession through the city had always represented workers' strength and power, as well as a certain pride in working class skills and culture. To completely remove the march had an important impact on how the day was perceived. Its coverage almost disappeared from the major newspapers. As the political content was lost, so the *Argus*, which in 1929 had been almost hysterical in its denunciations, was more than happy to support the carnival. In 1930, the *Argus* provided the following pleasant description:

The assemblage certainly lost nothing in brightness by the translation ...
It was an ideal day for the out-of-doors, and the sunshine and pleasant
autumn breezes had more free play at Flemington...⁴⁵

Without the procession, it could be forgotten that the day signified workers' struggle.

The carnival also allowed for the papering over of growing divisions. The Depression opened up huge fractures within the labour movement, as unions struggled—and largely failed—to deal with the new questions the economic crisis threw up. By 1932, roughly one in three workers were unemployed in Victoria. At both State and federal levels the ALP attacked working class living standards, and disillusionment with Labor grew. Unemployed workers' movements, housewives' associations, and other forms of non-trade union political organisation began to spring to life, as the ALP governments, under pressure from banks and business, attacked the basic wage and working class living standards. The Communist Party grew significantly, wielding influence much larger than its formal membership, particularly in the unemployed movement and trade unions. Within the ALP, a polarisation occurred and led to significant splits. On the left this polarisation manifested itself around J.T. Lang, the populist Premier of New South Wales, who expressed a biting rhetorical hostility to the banks and big business to mobilise support around him.

When labour demonstrations occurred, the increasing divisions came to the fore, as in the 1932 May Day celebrations in Melbourne, where Communists and others, enraged by the VTHC and ALP speakers, physically attacked them and dragged them from the platform. Reeves and Stephens have argued that it was this occurrence that led to the winding back of Eight Hours Day celebrations.⁴⁶ But this ignores the fact that the celebrations were wound back *before* May Day 1932. Indeed, it was after this event that the VTHC ceased to

44 Trades Hall Council minute books, 10 March 1930, p. 561, Trades Hall Council records, State Library of Victoria.

45 'Eight Hours Day: how holiday was spent' *Argus* 25 March 1930, p. 12.

46 Reeves and Stephens *Badges of labour*, p. 12.

participate in May Day celebrations and *restored* their own Eight Hours procession, over which they felt they could exercise control.

This conflict helps to explain why the picnics, carnivals and sports dominated Eight Hours' celebrations between 1930 and 1932. Such depoliticized events were a response to the differences that emerged in the labour movement. Even though ALP politicians did speak, the focus of the day was leisure. With consistently large crowds, there was an element of keeping up appearances, as the carnival allowed the EHC and its ALP friends to present an image of being able to mobilise thousands of people. The following statement from the *Labor Call* is revealing:

Lamentably... petty differences have frequently marred... the attainment of this laudible desideratum [unity]... Processions have now been almost completely displaced by devious degrees of 'stunting' as vehicles of propaganda, especially by Labor's opponents.⁴⁷

The removal of the procession allowed the ALP to deal with opposition and conceal political divisions.

In response to the cancellation of the procession, alternative labour days started to gain more significance. May Day in particular grew significantly in popularity throughout the Great Depression. Although it had always been celebrated by radicals, several unions began organising and promoting this day specifically because of the abandonment of the Eight Hours procession.⁴⁸ Until 1933 May Day was organised independently but supported by the VTHC, and the celebration tended to be more openly political and less tied to Labor Party politics than was the Eight Hours procession. Even at its height, the May Day march never mobilised the same numbers as the Eight Hours Day had before the First World War. Nonetheless because of the cancellation of the Eight Hours celebrations, May Day became more prominent than previously, able now to mobilise several thousand marchers.

After the 1932 altercations between the ALP and the Communists, the balance of this arrangement began to change. The ALP and VTHC withdrew their support from May Day and in 1933 the VTHC resumed its own Eight Hours procession. However, the Eight Hours Day was not immune to the tumult of the Great Depression and the fractures it created in the labour movement, and from 1933 onwards it was greatly altered. The 1933 resumption of the Eight Hours Day march revealed changes in the labour movement. Still organised by the Eight Hours Committee, the day nonetheless ceased to be a simple celebration for the benefit of the ALP. The procession between 1933 and 1935 held large contingents of Communists and their sympathisers, who challenged the respectability and conformity of the march.

After its three year pause, the Eight Hours Day procession resumed with a splash in 1933. Over 4000 unionists paraded through the streets in organised contingents, returning to the

47 'The day we celebrate—Eight Hours anniversary' *Labor Call* 10 March 1932, p. 6.

48 'May Day demonstration' *Argus* 31 March 1930, p. 17.

old tradition of the march representing a display of the strength and power of the labour movement. In fact, however, what the day really showed was the relative strength of the radical left. In 1929, only 20 Communists had marched.⁴⁹ In 1933, the *Argus* denounced their 'intrusion' into the march as being against the spirit of the Eight Hours Day. Some 1500 people marched under the banners of the Communist Party, the Militant Minority, and the unemployed, comprising more than a third of the procession. The day could no longer be a celebration of Labor, as it was only the participation of the more radical left that made the day a success—had they not been there, the march would have been far less successful, with only around 2500 non-Communists marching in union contingents.⁵⁰

After the relaxed reporting of the picnics in 1930-1932, the *Argus* was not quite so distressed as it had been in the late-1920s. The smaller numbers meant the day was no longer a threat, but more importantly the paper could side with the organisers against the Communists. The reporter spoke of 'the conflict of ideals' in the procession, and noted the conflict between the march officials, police and Communists:

An attempt was made by some of the Trades Hall officials to prevent the intrusion, but the police refrained from intervening... Trouble appeared to be likely when the procession was returning to Trades Hall. The Communists dropped out... with the object of holding a meeting in the gardens. Many of the men followed the leaders into the gardens, but [sic] the police were in the act of dispersing the assemblage when a heavy hailstorm occurred.

As the *Argus* noted, the large Communists had altered the procession 'markedly.'⁵¹ The Eight Hours Day was no longer a vehicle' of ALP dominance.

The same pattern was repeated in 1934 and 1935, with large unemployed and Communist contingents participating. But the VTHC was not content to allow the Communists to impose themselves on a march that had historically been its own. Increasingly it moved to impose its control and authority. This was done at first by changing the emphasis of the march. Rather than a march of unions, the correspondence files of the Labour Day Committee indicate that the day was increasingly to be dominated by elaborate floats *supported by* marching unionists.⁵² Still, as late as 1935, the *Argus* continued complaining about the 'offensive' slogans of the unemployed marchers.⁵³ Eventually all groups not affiliated to VTHC were banned from the march in 1939.⁵⁴

49 'Eight Hours Day: procession through city' *Argus* 19 March 1929, pp. 7-8.

50 'Eight Hours Day: procession revived: Communist intrusion' *Argus* 21 March 1933, p. 7.

51 *ibid.*

52 Labour Day Committee Correspondence, 1935, undated circular, Victorian Trades Hall Papers, University of Melbourne Archives.

53 'Labour Day march' *Argus* 2 April 1935, p. 6.

54 'NO OUTSIDE GROUPS—Labour march' *Argus* 17 March 1939, p. 3.

The moves made by the VTHC to exclude the Communists had tended to make the march less political. The floats—although decorative—were only political in the most liberal use of the word. They took up few contemporary political issues, but rather focussed on the history of the trade union movement. The Communists, by contrast, appropriated the distinctive class sentiment of previous years, seeing the day as a celebration of and site for working class struggle. This can be seen in the kinds of floats displayed in the procession.

In 1935 the newly-renamed Labour Day was proclaimed to be occurring in the hundredth year of Australian trade unionism, and great effort was invested to ensure it was the largest procession in years, attracting 6000 people. Yet outside the ranks of the Communists, the unemployed, and unions with Communist sympathies, there was little political content in the procession. The *Sun* described the march as consisting of, '[f]loral and pictorial floats of peace and social movements, historical tableaux of the soldiery, chain gangs, and political oppression of the days of the Todpuddle martyrs,' making reference to the long-passed convict days.⁵⁵ The Trades Hall Council float was a 'tastefully decorated floral float, carrying little girls fresh and lovely in their delicate gossamer dresses.'⁵⁶ The relatively small mobilisation of the trade unions needs to be seen in this context. Although higher than previous years, the number of unionists was only 3075, and newspaper reports suggest that the increase in numbers came primarily from the Communist-aligned unions.⁵⁷ Most of the unions only mobilised officials, rather than the rank and file membership.⁵⁸ Even when the overall procession was larger, it was increasingly the case that those attracted by radical politics drew the largest contingents. After 1935, the march declined until in 1939, after the banning of the Communists and other organisations not affiliated to VTHC, the march could muster only 3000 people.⁵⁹ As the VTHC moved to sideline the Communist 'intrusion,' it also succeeded in hastening the decline of the Eight Hours Day march.

Women and the Eight Hours Day

It is worth some consideration of the role that women played in the Eight Hours Day, bearing in mind that during the Great Depression women rose substantially as a proportion of the work force. Yet in spite of this women were often assigned by the organisers a passive or objectified, rather than a role as an important section of the labour movement. This could often be contradictory, and did not go unchallenged.

55 'Pageantry and propaganda in march of 6000' *Sun* 2 April 1935, p. 10.

56 'Labour Day march "best for twenty years"' *The Age* 2 April 1935, p. 10.

57 *ibid.* Unions with larger rank and file contingents were the ARU and coal miners, both influenced by the Communists.

58 'Labour Day march—many trade displays' *Argus* 2 April 1935, p. 6.

59 'Labour Day march—dove as emblem' *Argus* 21 March 1939, p. 2.

During the early 1920s, prior to proceedings being run by Trades Hall, special considerations were made to ensure women workers played a prominent role in proceedings. Unions in industries employing large numbers of women were deliberately given prominent roles in procession, and on occasion special arrangements were made to ensure such unions could march—for example, in 1921, the organisers gave special financial assistance to the Ammunitions and Cordite Workers' Union specifically because of the large number of women members in that union.⁶⁰ Once the organisation was taken over by the VTHC, however, such special considerations ceased, and the role women played in the Eight Hours Day became more contradictory. On the one hand, the EHC was the only Trades Hall body that women were elected to during this period, and a number of significant ALP women organisers, such as Jean Daley, played crucial roles in these positions.

In spite of this, the official VTHC organisers seemed to show little interest in involving women as organised labour in the day's proceedings. As well as ending special considerations for women-dominated unions, the organisers seemed to treat women primarily as caterers or entertainment. The ALP's Central Women's Organising Committee's only contribution was to provide catering for the Eight Hour Banquet. As well, women unionists were often objectified in the day's proceedings. In 1927, the EHC introduced a new competition for women, the 'Popular Girl' competition,⁶¹ and in 1929 this was superseded by a 'Finest Business Girls' competition, which was judged in part on the basis of appearance.⁶² Outside of this, the only consideration of women in the EHC's minute books is in their capacity as entertainment at the Eight Hours Carnival. The passivity and objectification assigned to them by the EHC was undoubtedly exacerbated during the abandonment of the march, as this removed even the possibility of women playing a role in union contingents.

However, women could and did play an important role in the Eight Hours Day, and challenged the passive position assigned to them by the official leadership. In 1929, a group of 'female sympathisers' marched behind the timber strikers, although they were not counted as a separate contingent from the striking workers in the official statistics and were largely left out of reports of the day's events.⁶³ This is one of the few times that women are mentioned at all in the press regarding their participation in the Eight Hours

60 Eight Hours Committee Minute Books, 1917-1925, Executive Meeting, 2 March 1921, p. 175.

61 Eight Hours Committee Minutes 1926-1930, 26 January 1927, pp. 53-55.

62 'Eight Hours Day: holiday attractions' *Argus* 24 March 1930, p. 8.

63 'EIGHT HOURS DAY: procession through city,' *Argus* 19 March 1929, p. 7, Part of the difficulty in finding when and where women participated in the march is that the nature of the day meant contingents were identified by industry not gender, with the only notable exception being the Female Confectioners' Union. With the inclusion of explicitly political organisations—such as the Communists and Unemployed Workers' Movement—it becomes even more difficult, as these contingents were organised around political demands rather than industry of employment, meaning one can not draw even the distinction between male-dominated industries and female-dominated industries.

Day, and indicates women did not simply assume the passive role allocated to them. Rather, they were active participants as part of the working class movement.

It is likely as well that women were part of the contestation of the Eight Hours Day during the Great Depression. Working class women suffered under the strain of the Depression. Domestic burdens increased as soaring unemployment and falling wages made it increasingly impossible to make ends meet. As well, due to the unevenness in unemployment patterns, women often became sole income earners as industries employing mostly women tended to be less hard hit. The paltry wages—less than half the male wage—were often needed to support whole families. Single unemployed women in Victoria could not, moreover, access sustenance. This situation had a radicalising affect on large sections of working class women, and many were attracted to the organising work being done by Communists and others in housewives' associations and the unemployed movement. As one woman writing to the Communist *Working Woman* put it, working class women were attracted to such forces because they felt they could 'show ... workers how to stop the boss from putting it over them.'⁶⁴

Because of the lack of commentary on it—either in the press or in official documents—it is unclear exactly to what extent this overflowed into the Eight Hours Day events. Resumption of the march in 1933 provided women with more opportunities to play an active role, as they were once again able to be part of union and other political contingents. It is difficult to gauge the extent to which they did participate, although it is clear that unions with large female memberships did join in: for example, unions in the clothing and food industries had reasonably large contingents in 1934.⁶⁵ As well, women were undoubtedly part of the more political contingents such as those of the Unemployed Workers' Movement and the Communists. Daisy McWilliams, a working class woman around the radical left, wrote in her memoirs about the experience of marching, with her small children, with the unemployed contingent in Sydney's Eight Hours Day during the early 1930s when Jack Lang was Premier. McWilliams describes how many who marched with the unemployed movement were those who could not qualify to march with union contingents, including 'youths who had never had work... and many... housewives.'⁶⁶ Indeed, it is notable in the *Argus* that reports of the 1933 march comment on the presence of both sexes in the large sections of unemployed and Communists.⁶⁷ Similarly, in 1934 reports of the scuffle between the unemployed and police that followed the march included specific mention of the presence of women.⁶⁸

64 'To hell with piecework' *Working Woman* 1 August 1930, p. 4.

65 'LABOUR DAY MARCH: procession unimpressive' *Argus* 20 March 1934, p. 7

66 Daisy McWilliams, 'Unemployed,' in Len Fox (ed) *Depression down under*, Southwood Press, Marrickville, 1977, p. 39

67 'EIGHT HOURS DAY: procession revived' *Argus* 21 March 1933, p. 7

68 'TROUBLE AFTER PROCESSION: police and communists' *Argus* 20 March 1934, p. 7

This indicates that although the organisers mainly provided for women's participation in the realms of catering and entertainment, working class women were not merely restricted to that role. Instead this passivity was challenged by their presence in union and especially in the political contingents, where they could participate as part of the organised working class movement.

The Eight Hours Day: a summary

We have surveyed a history fraught with contradictions. On the one hand, this day was born out of the struggle for better working class living standards, and represented the historical achievements of working class mobilisation. On the other, its position as an officially sanctioned event subjected the celebrations to pressures of moderation and respectability. These tensions pushed the organisers into compromises.

As Victoria sank into the Great Depression, the organisers of the march were faced with further difficulties. As the economic crisis radicalised sections of the labour movement, the organisers cancelled the most political part of the day, the procession, in order to play down political divisions and unrest. By replacing the procession with a carnival, the organisers assured that the political ruptures could, for a time, be obscured. With the emergence of May Day as an alternative to the Eight Hours Day, and the playing out of tensions between the ALP and militants on that day, the VTHC decided to resume the Eight Hours Day procession as an event that they could control. But the balance of forces in the labour movement had changed, and the VTHC began to exclude the more radical elements from the Eight Hours Day march.

Ultimately, in so doing, the VTHC contributed to the decline of the Eight Hours Day, by removing the politics—and thus the purpose—of the day's celebrations. The perennial juggling act played by the VTHC fell apart under the pressure of the changing political situation created by the Great Depression. Although the commemoration limped along until the early 1950s, it did so with little spirit. Its eventual subsumption into the corporate-friendly 'Moomba festival' seems an ironic, yet fitting, end to 'labour's day.' But what of that day supposedly dedicated to the interests of veterans?

'Remember Gallipoli': mourning and meaning

Sir John Monash mounted the dais at the Exhibition Anzac Day ceremony in 1928. He said that the time had long passed since he needed to explain the importance of Anzac Day to the Australian public. For soldiers who had served, it was one of sacred remembrance and mourning for those who had died in the First World War. Their duty in post-war Australia was to uphold the Anzac values of patriotism, loyalty and comradeship—'a comradeship which must never be allowed to fade out.'⁶⁹

69 'ANZAC DAY COMMEMORATION: magnificent muster of ex-soldiers' *The Age* 26 April 1928, pp. 9-10.

In the period of tumult surrounding the Great Depression, Anzac Day played a major role in mobilising tens of thousands around socially and politically conservative values. Yet the commemoration of Anzac Day was more complicated than the simple nationalist celebration of, for example, Australia Day. Anzac Day in Melbourne gathered force in the mid to late 1920s as an event to celebrate the ‘birth of a nation’ through the exploits of the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) during the First World War, at Gallipoli in particular. But it did so through a complex negotiation of sentiment around mourning and pacifism that were widespread in the inter-war period. Indeed one of the messages in the 1920s and 1930s was that Anzac Day was a sacred and pacifist event that recognised the sanctity of sacrifice of those who had fought and died in the First World War, which was used as cover for militaristic nationalism and other conservative values embodied in the day’s celebrations.

The rise of Anzac Day in the inter-war period has tended to be presented by nationalist historians as a natural progression from the First World War.⁷⁰ John Robertson, for example, maps the rise of Anzac Day from 1916 onwards as though there was an unbroken continuity. 25 April, the argument goes, was always a day of great importance to Australia; it marked the first blood sacrifice of the nation on the shores of Gallipoli and was celebrated from the first anniversary of the event in 1916, as an expression of national pride and community mourning. In the post-war era, the only questions around Anzac Day were those regarding whether to celebrate it on 25 April or the nearest Sunday.⁷¹

However, if one looks in closer detail at the commemoration of Anzac Day in Melbourne from the end of the First World War, the picture is more complex. As Mary Wilson has argued, Anzac Day in Melbourne during the interwar period was not a simple story of up, up and away. Although there had been events during the war and a large march in 1921, Anzac Day did not receive any significant public recognition until the mid-1920s. In 1925, there was a march of around 7,000, which was the first since 1921 and was significantly smaller.⁷² In late 1925 Anzac Day was gazetted as a public holiday and from 1926 onwards the day was remarkably more successful. Thus it is not the case that Anzac Day emerged

70 For example, see Michael Blagg, ‘Anzac Day’ *Sabretache* 47 (1) March 2006, pp. 9-11; Chris Ashton, ‘Anzac Day as a Fashion Barometer’ *Quadrant* 151 (4) April 2007, pp. 43-7; J.G. Pavils *Anzac Day: the undying debt* Lythrum Press, Adelaide, 2007.

71 John Robertson *Anzac and empire: the tragedy and glory of Gallipoli* Hamlyn, Melbourne, 1990, pp. 245-258.

72 March figures for the Anzac Day events were much larger than the Eight Hours Day during this period, yet were still considered a failure. The Eight Hours Day march in Melbourne never appears to have mobilised the same numbers as the Anzac Day march in the late-1920s and into the 1930s, although it could mobilise in excess of 10 000 prior to the First World War. I suggest this was especially due to the extraordinary level of patronage Anzac Day received, from all levels of society (including sections of the labour movement).

naturally from the First World War and went from success to success; rather there were ebbs and flows.⁷³

The rise of Anzac Day from the mid 1920s can be attributed to a number of factors. Although the Returned Soldiers and Sailors' Imperial League of Australia (RSSILA)⁷⁴ received considerable government patronage in the immediate post-war period, it was marked by splits and political rivalry throughout the 1920s, often a response to the RSSILA's middle class and conservative politics.⁷⁵ In Victoria, the RSSILA's membership plummeted from 39 000 in 1919 to less than 6000 in 1924, and did not significantly recover until 1929.⁷⁶ In the period between 1920 and the late 1920s, the Anzac legend itself was still highly contested and hence so was the potential meaning of Anzac Day. As the RSSILA moved to stop its haemorrhaging membership and regain its authority over the Anzac tradition, the commemoration of Anzac Day appears to have fallen by the wayside.⁷⁷

The revival of Anzac Day followed its proclamation as a national holiday and the concurrent ascendancy of the RSSILA. Proceedings were organised by a subsidiary of the RSSILA, the Anzac Day Commemoration Council. There were, however, other forces at play. The revival of Anzac Day coincided with rising unemployment and the discontent of the Depression years. In 1926, amid furore over the dire situation of soldier settlers, the self-proclaimed 'diggers' advocate, *Smith's Weekly*, spent a considerable sum of money paying for the transportation of returned soldiers to Melbourne in order to ensure Anzac Day was a success. The following year, when unemployment began to rise significantly, the presence of the Duke and Duchess of York at Melbourne's Anzac Day ensured participation in the march reached 27 000.⁷⁸ From this point onwards, much effort was made to ensure success—for almost a month in advance, major newspapers ran almost daily updates on preparations; and the major political parties—conservative and Labor alike—fell over themselves in an attempt to prove that they were the most committed to the day. From 1934, the government provided free train fares for returned servicemen to

73 Mary Wilson, 'The making of Melbourne's Anzac Day' *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 20 (2) 1974, pp. 197-209.

74 This body today known as the Returned Services League (RSL) has undergone numerous name changes. During the period in question, it was officially the Returned Soldiers' and Sailors' Imperial League of Australia. It was also known as the Returned Soldiers' League, the Returned Soldiers' Association, the Returned Soldiers' and Sailors' League, or simply the League.

75 Marilyn Lake, 'The power of Anzac' in M. McKernan and M. Browne (eds) *Australia, two centuries of war and peace* Australian War Memorial and Allen and Unwin, Canberra, 1988, pp. 194-222.

76 G. L. Kristianson, *The politics of patriotism: the pressure group activities of the Returned Servicemen's League* Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1966, pp. 234-5.

77 However the RSSILA regained ownership of the Anzac tradition earlier than its growth in membership suggests. Anzac Day in 1926, 1927 and 1928 was attended by greater numbers than the RSSILA could claim as members, even though the day was dominated by its politics.

78 Wilson, 'The making of Melbourne's Anzac Day', pp. 197-209.

attend the Dawn Service and city procession.⁷⁹ During the period 1928 to 1935, attendance at the Anzac Day march never dipped below 20 000 and in 1935 it reached 35 000.

This increased emphasis and patronage can be linked to the meanings and messages contained in Anzac Day, discussed below, which fashioned servicemen's 'comradeship and egalitarianism' into 'an ideology of labour relations, consisting of 'corporate responsibility', national co-operation and industrial peace.'⁸⁰ Given the rising class and political antagonisms of the Great Depression, it was not surprising that the day that promoted exactly these values became the most sacred non-religious day on the calendar.

Indeed, Anzac Day transmitted its conservative agenda more effectively specifically because it did not promote an overtly pro-war nationalism, but surrounded itself instead in an aura of sacred mourning. In a period in which the memories of the casualties and distress of the First World War were still fresh in people's recollection, it would have been unfitting for the day to be seen as a celebration of war. Anzac Day accommodated itself to this bereavement and discontent, yet in so doing promoted a politically conservative agenda.

Quite elaborate activities contributed to this sentiment of sanctity and mourning. The official ceremonies were the march through Melbourne, including a brief ceremony at the temporary Cenotaph on Parliament House steps; this was followed by the non-denominational service at the Exhibition Building. From 1933 the proceedings also included a Dawn Service: returned soldiers and their fathers met at the newly-erected Shrine of Remembrance to observe two minutes silence and hear the Last Post. These were large events, involving thousands of returned soldiers. Smaller ceremonies were also organised by sub-branches of the RSSILA in the suburbs. In addition, there were numerous Church services on the Day, as well as special services on the nearest Sunday. Legacy, with the cooperation of the RSSILA and the Education Department, organised a school ceremony on the day before Anzac Day (or on the Friday before if Anzac Day fell on a Monday) from 1930 onwards.

The commemoration of Anzac Day was posed specifically in terms of mourning and sacred remembrance. There was a ban on almost all trading and industry on the day with the exception of certain essential services, and companies who defied the ban faced hefty fines. Its sanctity was often compared to Good Friday. In no other State was observance so strictly enforced; Victoria was the only State that shut down industry and trading for the entire day. The gears of Victorian capitalism ground to a halt: almost every shop was closed, almost every industry brought to a standstill, in the name of the exploits of the AIF in the First World War.

Any potential transgression of the day's sacred nature was denounced as anti-Australian and unpatriotic by the RSSILA. In 1931 the Day fell on a Saturday and certain picture

79 'Musings of the month' *Duckboard* 1 May 1935, p. 6.

80 Lake, 'The power of Anzac', p. 222.

theatres indicated an intention to exploit a legal loophole that would have allowed them to open. The response from the RSSILA, politicians and media was outraged. The Blackburn branch of the RSSILA stated:

[T]his branch views with profound disgust and loathing the threat of the picture theatres to desecrate Anzac day [sic] by opening their theatres, and pledges itself to do everything possible to defeat the anti-Australian sentiment evident amongst picture interests, of which the latest decision forms the most odious and detestable example, violating, as it does, all decency, and showing a callous and cynical disregard of the feelings of those whose fathers, sons, brothers and relatives gave their lives in the service of their country...⁸¹

Picture theatres were threatened with pickets by returned soldiers, until they ‘voluntarily’ agreed to remain closed.⁸² Clearly, it was every Australian’s *duty* to observe Anzac Day, and those who did not choose to were effectively forced to do so.

All of the statements around controversies such as this one focussed on the experience of mourning. Hence the concern of the Blackburn branch of the RSSILA with ‘the feelings of those whose... relatives gave their lives in service.’ This was in response to the recent experience of war, and the related experience of loss and mourning. The sanctity of the day aimed to relate experiences to legitimise its broader messages. As well, the fact that this sanctity was enshrined in law and sanctioned by the state lent the messages within Anzac Day ideological weight.

As the 1930s progressed, the nature of Anzac Day commemoration began to change. As the economic and political situation began to stabilise, the nature of Anzac Day began to be discussed. In 1934 an open debate began in the RSSILA’s journal, the *Duckboard*, as to whether Anzac Day should continue to be commemorated with extensive trading and industry bans. Increasingly a voice was given in the *Duckboard* to those who advocated only a part-day trading ban in line with other States, which would have allowed businesses to open in the late afternoon and evening without penalty. This was in spite of the fact the RSSILA leadership was for a total ban. 1935 in some ways marked a turning point: on the twentieth anniversary of the Gallipoli landing, the spirit of the day was less of mourning and more of nationalist celebration. This reflected the growing distance between the Gallipoli landing and the present day: as the hardships of the war began to fade from memory, the day could become an open nationalist event.

It also reflected the changing political situation. The Australian economy was beginning to strengthen by 1936, although it had not yet made a full recovery. With economic stability came a level of political stability, and this meant Anzac Day did not need to maintain the

81 ‘Anzac Day appeal by Sir J. Monash’ *The Age* 17 April 1931, p. 11.

82 *ibid.* p. 10.

same level of sanctity. For the last half of the 1930s, it was not so mournful as it had been during its early commemoration.

Challenges and contestations

Comradeship was often praised in Anzac Day ceremonies. The RSSILA Victorian Branch president, E. Turnbull, in 1928 described being in the AIF where ‘comradeship was a real thing... true comradeship [is] only [found] amongst those [for] whom mutual service has created an everlasting bond.’⁸³ This sentiment was explicitly trans-class and, arguably, anti-class. In particular, the march that took place on Anzac Day saw soldiers of varying class backgrounds and experience marching together in their old war time units. The Naval Staff Office recognised the implications:

The Anzac Day procession is essentially a parade of returned Soldiers and Sailors and one of its greatest claims to distinction is a levelling of all present ranks, occupations and class distinctions. The units are led by their old Officers and, in the ranks, ‘capital’ and ‘labour’ for once march side by side.⁸⁴

Implicit—and sometimes explicit—in the organisation of events were calls for cross-class friendship and industrial peace. In 1929, against the backdrop of the timber strike, Brigadier-General B.E. Elliott used his Anzac Day message in the *Duckboard* to call on returned soldiers to ensure ‘peace in industry and the prevalence of law and order in the settlement of [industrial] disputes.’⁸⁵

As the Great Depression wore on and Australia did not make a quick recovery from economic crisis, Anzac Day was used to mobilise sentiments that encouraged people to make sacrifices in the name of the national interest. This was most succinctly put by the *Age* editorial in 1932:

The Anzac tradition acquires a special meaning in these days of reconstruction demanded by unparalleled depression... At the thought of those who bled and sickened and died, how sordid appear the shifts and pleas of those who to-day seek to evade the small measure of sacrifice demanded of them by the fallen economic fortunes of their country.⁸⁶

Thus, the editorial continued, it was up to all to share the sacrifice needed to pull out of the Depression, labour and capital alike. No recognition was given to the fact that working class living standards had plummeted in the Great Depression, and unemployment in

83 ‘Anzac greetings’ *Duckboard* 2 April 1928, p. 6.

84 National Archives of Australia, Department of Defence, Naval Staff Office, MP150/1, Assemblies, march and service on Anzac Day [1931-1936], 462/201/902, Department of Defence Minute Paper, 25 February 1931.

85 ‘Anzac greetings’ *Duckboard* 1 April 1929, pp. 9-10.

86 ‘The call of Anzac’ *The Age* 24 April 1932, p. 6.

Victoria was reaching thirty per cent.⁸⁷ The Anzacs, the logic went, did not suffer and die so that the ingrates of the current generation could refuse to accept sacrifice in the name of the nation.

This message did not go unchallenged, however. The depression brought into sharp focus questions of class as unemployment wreaked havoc on working class soldiers. As one returned soldier bitterly described to Alistair Thomson, being a returned soldier often made finding employment during the Depression harder, as soldiers were seen by employers to be physically and mentally scarred, and thus far from ideal workers.⁸⁸ The experiences of grinding poverty experienced by such returned soldiers was a patently different to that of the likes of Sir John Monash or other officers they marched alongside.

In 1932 publicity was given to a suggestion that unemployed returned soldiers should march as a separate bloc in the Anzac Parade, rather than the usual tradition of marching with their wartime unit. The inclusion of such a contingent would have undermined the classless message of the day, as it recognised that different and counter-posed class interests existed within returned soldiers. It is unclear with whom the suggestion originated, but it was quickly denounced by the RSSILA as being Communist interference. The letters page of the *Sun*, however, suggests that there existed amongst some returned soldiers support for such a proposal. 'One of them' wrote, 'unemployed diggers who are taking part in the procession should march at the head of the procession with a banner showing them as such.'⁸⁹

Others wrote to denounce the suggestion, and, in any case, it was never adopted by the RSSILA. Nor, for that matter, did any organised unemployed group attempt to impose such a contingent on the march. Nonetheless, the publicity received by the suggestion, as well as the polarised debate that ensued, indicate the official message of classless camaraderie and sacrifice were not universally accepted nor completely unchallenged.

Left and right

The Anzac Day commemorations also had to respond to the overwhelming anti-war sentiment that existed in the inter-war period, when the First World War was largely seen as a discredited venture. The large death toll of Australian troops; the maimed soldiers who returned, and the difficult experience on the domestic front, marked by high inflation and shortages, raised strong doubts about the worthiness of the First World War. Moreover, the difficult process of repatriation and the mourning of those who had lost loved ones in the war meant that there was a certain pacifist scepticism.

87 Wendy Lowenstein *Weevils in the flour: an oral record of the 1930s depression in Australia* Melbourne, Scribe, 1981, p. 14.

88 Alistair Thomson, 'The return of the soldier' in Richard White and Penny Russell (eds) *Memories and dreams: reflections on twentieth century Australia* Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1997, p. 62.

89 'Workless diggers' *Sun* 11 April 1932, p. 6.

This affected the way Anzac Day was commemorated. Speakers, from pulpit and platform alike, stressed the horrors of war and urged people to oppose it. In 1929, Major-General Sir John Talbot said it was:

the bounden duty of those who have experienced [war's] horrors, to instil into the hearts and minds of the present and future generations, its uselessness, folly, and the appalling suffering and loss entailed together with the aftermath of unemployment, misery and discontent, even to the victors... I think peace at home and abroad is the thing we most desire and require...⁹⁰

This sentiment was particularly echoed in the churches, where in remembrance services it was often cast as a Christian duty to oppose the horrors of war. In 1928, St. Patrick's Church urged its congregation, 'to save our young country from those terrors...the very memory of which renders hideous the thought of war', while the Scots Church encouraged Australians to 'do everything in their power to reach out and make greater effort to understand other nations, so as to bring us nearer to the ideals of the Prince of Peace.'⁹¹

These speeches gave Anzac Day a certain pacifist veneer. However, as Alistair Thomson has pointed out, the reality of the Anzac experience was always more complicated.⁹² Anzac speeches constantly cloaked themselves in a cover of opposition to war, yet at the same time promoted the veneration of militarism and an understanding of Australian history that saw national greatness achieved through the exploits of war. Thus, in 1932, Henry Chauvel stated that Anzac Day was not 'a display of militarism,' while the whole ceremony was geared towards a celebration of the exploits of Australians in war.⁹³ According to RSSILA Federal President, G.J. Dyett: 'Anzac Day is Australia's National Day, because it was in consequence of the patriotism, valor and heroism of her citizen soldiers... that Australia was elevated to nationhood.'⁹⁴

There were always sections of society that rejected this approach to Anzac Day, particularly the labour movement. *Labor Call*, the organ of Trades Hall Council and the ALP in Victoria, for example, argued in 1931:

The lesson of Anzac Day is the betrayal. It was said to be the war to end war. The world has betrayed us... A casual walk down Bourke-street on Saturday afternoon [Anzac Day] is convincing that all these marchers and spectators are of the working class, who do the nation's real work, and its fighting... This is the great army of workers, who go out on some

90 'Anzac greetings' *Duckboard* 1 April 1929, p. 8.

91 'Church services' *The Age* 26 April 1928, p. 10.

92 Alistair Thomson, 'The return of the soldier', pp. 73-76.

93 'Personal message from Sir Henry Chauvel' *The Age* 23 April 1932, p. 16.

94 'Anzac Day message from the Federal President of the R.S.S.I.L.A.' *Duckboard* 1 April 1931, p. 5.

pretext to slay or be slain by another army of workers, said to be in the cause of patriotism.⁹⁵

The Communist *Workers' Weekly* argued for workers to oppose the commemoration by attending May Day and other workers' celebrations instead. Letters from returned soldiers were prominent, with one from 'Class-Conscious Digger,' in 1928, being fairly typical:

April 25 has become a day of imperial boasting and military boosting... On Anzac Day, capitalists, politicians and priests will don their silk hats and decorations and come out and chant about Anzac in order to build up a new military tradition in Australia, to get ready new Anzacs for recruiting, to prepare young Australia for another bloody massacre.⁹⁶

As time wore on, the crisis in global capitalism started to throw up more starkly questions of war, especially with the rise of fascism. In Australia, anti-war sentiment began to move leftwards, especially evident in the rise of the Movement Against War and Fascism (MAWF), which, although a Communist front group, also involved other people.⁹⁷ The radical left grew in popularity with the growth of the Communist Party and the rise of Socialisation Propaganda Units (commonly known as Socialisation Units) within the ALP. Based in NSW, the Socialisation Units involved many thousands of working class people around questions of how to implement socialism, and were indicative of a sharp radicalisation occurring around the left of the Labor Party.⁹⁸ Although sharpest in NSW, across the country debates raged in the ALP about socialism and related questions such as what attitude to take to populist NSW Premier Jack Lang.

As the anti-war movement became more radical, the MAWF started to utilise Anzac Day itself as a site for anti-war protest. In 1933 and 1934, anti-war conferences were held in Melbourne in the immediate lead up to Anzac Day. From 1934 onwards, the Victorian Council Against Fascism and War (the local arm of MAWF) began laying wreaths on the Cenotaph containing anti-war messages. The MAWF increasingly advanced an anti-war agenda in resistance to the 'imperial boasting and military boosting' of Anzac Day.⁹⁹

The RSSILA responded with an increasingly anti-Communist stance. It had always been openly hostile to leftwing organisations such as the Communist Party. In 1928, when people labelled 'Communists' by the RSSILA and press distributed anti-militarist propaganda at the Anzac Day march, the RSSILA responded by denouncing the action as 'a gross abuse of the liberties people in Australia enjoy,' and called on the Federal

95 'The lesson of Anzac Day' *Labor Call* 30 April 1931, p. 4.

96 Class-Conscious Digger, 'Bloody Anzac—once bitten, twice shy' *Workers' Weekly* 27 April 1928, p. 2.

97 Stuart McIntyre *The Reds: The Communist Party of Australia from origins to illegality* Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1998, pp. 270-274.

98 Terry Symonds, "'Socialism in our time": Communists and the New South Wales Labor Party during the great depression' *Socialist Worker Review* No 3, November 1999.

99 Class Conscious Digger, 'Bloody Anzac'.

Government to do something about the present situation regarding the Communists.¹⁰⁰ By 1932, this hostility was more open, as demonstrated by the annual State school ceremony at the Cenotaph, at which the Lord Mayor of Melbourne, H.G. Smith, stated:

Unfortunately there were in our midst agents of a foreign country whose mission was to sap our loyalty. It devolved upon every Australian to resist such enemies to our nationhood.¹⁰¹

The State President of the RSSILA, G.W. Holland, contended the Communists would be defeated in the future, and that ‘the boys and girls of to-day... should dedicate their lives to national service.’¹⁰² Implicitly, fighting Communism was part of that national service.

Indeed, Anzac Day in 1932 seemed to be built up as a specifically an anti-Communist event. As part of the debate around unemployed returned soldiers marching as a separate contingent, virulently anti-Communist letters were published by the mainstream press, most particularly the *Sun*. Some encouraged Anzac Day to be used as a show of strength for anti-Communist forces. ‘Two Diggers’ urged the Communists to march as they felt ‘sure that the reception they would receive would remove any doubt as to whether the returned man was being influence by such propaganda.’¹⁰³ Anti-Communism had become part of the Anzac Day outlook.

By this time, the RSSILA showed open hostility to any anti-war message. The MAWF wreaths were pointedly removed from the Cenotaph because they ‘struck a discord in the proceedings.’ MAWF members at Anzac Day events, including returned soldiers, had their leaflets confiscated by police.¹⁰⁴ At the same time, to maintain a pacifist veneer, the RSSILA more explicitly claimed Anzac Day was not ‘a display of militarism.’¹⁰⁵ This enabled them to relate to the prevailing anti-war and pacifist sentiment while still promoting conservative nationalism.

Exclusion

The Anzac tradition always demanded special rights for returned soldiers. It comprised an exclusive and discriminatory foundation myth. As time went on, the RSSILA began to exclude more groups from the Anzac Day ceremonies. Women, in particular, were subject to ever-growing exclusion.

The nature of women’s role in the Anzac tradition was always linked to the political needs of the government at any given time. Thus, in wartime, when they were needed to encourage men to enlist, the role of women was given a special place. However, once the

100 ‘Branch reports: Melbourne’ *Duckboard* 1 June 1928, p. 37.

101 ‘Youth’s tribute: school children at Cenotaph’ *The Age* 23 April 1932, p. 16.

102 *ibid.*

103 Two diggers, ‘Diggers would explain’ *Sun* 19 April 1932, p. 6.

104 ‘Police remove wreath: inscription deemed offensive’ *The Age* 26 April 1934, p. 7.

105 ‘Personal message from Sir Henry Chauvel’ *The Age* 23 April 1932, p. 16.

war was over, they began to pose problems; as former dependants they demanded increased pensions and other recognition.¹⁰⁶ Moreover, they began to be blamed by the RSSILA for the problems of repatriation, especially the lack of jobs for returned soldiers.

This led to their exclusion from Anzac Day ceremonies. Women's roles had been secondary, but still important. Nurses could participate in the march, although they had to travel in cars; and mothers and widows were afforded a special place on the steps of Parliament during the ceremony at the temporary Cenotaph. In 1926, the *Argus* report makes clear that women were part of the Exhibition ceremonies, and could be heard 'sobbing' during the two minutes' silence.¹⁰⁷

However, by the 1930s, women were increasingly excluded from the formal ceremonies of the day. In 1928, only women who were invited representatives were able to attend the ceremony at the Exhibition Building. Even that right was revoked in 1932, supposedly to avoid a fire hazard, even though soldiers' fathers were allowed to take their place.¹⁰⁸ In 1933, when the Dawn Service became part of the Melbourne ceremonies, women were explicitly banned. The Dawn Service was far more stringently restricted in Victoria than in other States; the only people allowed to attend the Service were returned servicemen and their fathers. As Joy Damousi has shown, by the late 1930s, this exclusion became a point of contest, with women (unsuccessfully) trying to assert their right to attend.¹⁰⁹ In 1938, for example, several hundred women intruded on the Dawn Service, which was treated as somewhat of a sacred service for returned men. Later the same day, a group of around 100 women joined the tail of the Anzac Day march through the city. It is difficult to ascertain who these women were, but the public defence of such actions came from a conservative view point of objecting to the lack of recognition of their sacrifice for the nation. A letter from Margaret Groom in the *Argus*, writing in defence of her presence in the ceremony, pointed to her loss of a brother in the war, and asked, 'Why should I be "not wanted" [at the ceremony]?'¹¹⁰ The main issue appeared to be the lack of recognition for their sacrifices during wartime.

This lack of recognition did have an important political role. The increasing exclusion of women from the ceremonies meant that their suffering through the war was not deemed equal, making them easier targets for discrimination. In 1931, the RSSILA agreed to a twenty two per cent cut in the pension rate for dependants, which included wives and widowed mothers, as well as a reduction in other concessions and services for this group,

106 Damousi *The labour of loss*, pp. 26-84.

107 'Anzac Day' *Argus* 26 April 1926, p. 11.

108 'Anzac Day ceremonies' *The Age* 20 April 1932, p. 6. The RSSILA claimed that the presence of women would have caused a calamity in the case of a fire, whereas the presence of fathers would not have the same result.

109 Damousi *The labour of loss* pp. 35-38.

110 Cited in *ibid.* p. 37

in return for an agreement that soldiers' pensions would be maintained at the same rate. The *Argus* reported the RSSILA's justification:

[T]he State secretary of the Returned Soldiers' League (Mr. C. W. Joyce) said on Saturday that this practice was in conformity with that observed throughout the world. The principle involved was that soldiers' pensions were not adjustable, but that pensions paid to their dependants could be adjusted if the occasion demanded.¹¹¹

The special status given to returned soldiers meant that they escaped many of the attacks on social security that came during the Depression. The purpose of this exclusion was to set Australian returned soldiers as a group separate from the rest of society; it reinforced their claim to special rewards. And the RSSILA did demand reward—not just in the form of pensions and other repatriation privileges, but also in more political terms, such as preference in employment for returned soldiers, which undermined the trade union demand for *union* preference. In this sense, the inclusion or exclusion from the Anzac Day ceremonies played an important role in determining who could be given special consideration. Being given a special place in ceremony helped ensure one's place in the national mythology; this, in turn, helped those who were included escape some of the attacks on living standards that came with the Great Depression. Those who were excluded—such as women—were not so fortunate.

Anzac Day and the Eight Hours Day were opportunities to shape public opinion, because both were events that could mobilise significant numbers in public displays of strength. This was capitalised on during the Great Depression, by Trades Hall and the ALP as well as the RSSILA, to put forward their particular messages about society. These messages were shaped by, and responded to, social and political terrain in society, including interventions by Communists and women seeking to contest the terms of the days. These contestations were seldom successful because key institutions designed them to contain public sentiment within well-defined bounds. Still, these symbolic days remained battlegrounds. Public opinion was never as simple as conservative institutions wished.

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¹¹¹ 'War pensions: Economy Committee's task' *Argus* 6 July 1931, p. 10.

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