

"Bloody Sunday"

Source: Published in three extracts in the Melbourne Labor Party newspaper, *Labor Call*, from 12 June to 26 June 1919.



John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library. Records of Alex McCallum. Large crowd at funeral of Tom Edwards, Fremantle, 9 May 1919.

Foreword: The Fremantle Wharf Lumpers' strike of April-May 1919 is one of the most significant of the post-World War strikes in Australia. The origins of the dispute lie in the decision of the Fremantle Wharf Lumpers' Union (FWLU) in August 1917 to refuse to load food for export to Dutch sources, which they believed were being smuggled into war-time Germany. Despite this patriotic rationale, the bosses retaliated by locking out the unionists and instituting a "loyalist" scab union, the National Waterside Workers' Union. The scab union received preference over the members of the FWLU in employment on the docks.

In April 1919, during the Spanish Influenza pandemic, the FWLU refused to unload the ship *Dimboola* before the end of its mandatory week-long quarantine period, a quarantine period that the bosses and the scab union attempted to flout. Following the establishment of picket lines and with significant public support for their stand, the FWLU fought to re-establish union preference on the wharves and drive out the scabs.

Government intransigence led to the events described in the below article, when a sizeable force of police was sent, fully armed, to seize the wharf and allow scabs to land via boat.¹

¹ An official history was published in 1920 by the unions entitled the *Fremantle Wharf Crisis* and is publicly [available](#) on Wikisource.

The following extracts are taken from a letter written by an active participant in the Fremantle affair:—

The fact of the whole matter is that workers have 'tumbled' to the diabolical confidence trick that 'Nationalism' has put upon them, and they are all falling over one another to prove the genuineness of their return to the fold. The 'Railways,' who sold the "Lumpers shamefully in 1917, would have ceased to a man, if called upon, and, indeed, the hardest task of the leaders was to prevent bodies of men from ceasing work. Collie Miners, another union that went over body and soul to the Bosses, actually ceased for half a day, but resumed on advice from Perth, after resolving to leave Collie *en masse*, and march into Fremantle if required. Another union that did more than any other to break the '17 strike was the Carters and Drivers. On 'Bloody Sunday' seven of the workers' casualties were carters, and their members were at the front of the attack right through even beating the Lumpers for the front places.

...Well, the great day — Sunday, May 4... we reached Fremantle at 10.45 am. Going across the Bridge, we got the first hint of trouble — a policeman armed with a bayonet, but virtually a prisoner between two crowds of soldiers and women. It turned out that the policeman made a truce on his own rather than fight — so long as they did not take his rifle he would not resist. Nor did he, and only a miracle saved the launch that brought Premier Colebatch and his scabs from being sunk in the swirling rip that was like a mill-stream under the bridge.² One of the women dropped about 18 inches of railway rail on the boat. She did not know how to drop it. It struck flat and smashed through the roof on to the engine, but did no harm. Had it struck end on, the roof, deck and keel would inevitably have been pierced. She was rewarded with a revolver shot, which, however, turned out as harmless as the metal bar. A little earlier the motor cars, which were drawn up on the tramway bridge to take the party to the wharf, had been dispersed with fusillades of road metal... This happened, I gather, at about 8 or 9 am.

The Premier and his party proceeded to the 'monument' (statute of Engineer C. V. O'Connor). There were not above two or three hundred present at the time, and 150 armed police were more than a match for them. The barrier building near the monument proceeded likewise between three or four of the (adjacent) sheds. Cliff-street, which enters the wharf near the 'monument', is, I should explain, the chief vehicular entrance to the wharves, and here the barriers were made particularly strong, and the bulk of the police concentrated. Others guarded the bridges and approaches to the wharf, but they were quickly overpowered when reinforcements began to arrive in numbers," roused by bellmen on bicycles, who scoured Fremantle, dragging sleepers from their beds and worshippers from their churches.

It would be about 10.30, I gather, when a great crowd, collected at the northern end of the wharf, swarmed down the wharf road driving back the police and scabs (by the

² Hal Colebatch (1872-1953) was a right-wing politician who was premier of Western Australia from 17 April 1919 until 17 May 1919.

way not the ordinary scabs but a party of city gentlemen out for a Sunday airing and incidentally to 'teach these Lumpers a lesson'), with pickets, road metal and fists, until they reached almost back to their base near the 'monument.' Hitherto the main body of police durst not move, because an increasing crowd of women, armed with stones, railway metal and packages of pepper, held Cliff-street, and, although they made no attack on the police, the moment the latter moved they would undoubtedly have attacked the Premier, and thrown him into the river. However, things were desperate; a supplementary crowd overpowered the police guard on the railway footbridge, and swarmed down to the support of the first charge.

The Premier's party retired behind the pick-up station, keeping a small guard with them, and the bulk of the police charged the crowd with batons and bayonets. Some of the troopers also charged, but most of them formed across Cliff-street to stop a big rush of the rapidly-growing crowd there. The workers' forces by now numbered over a thousand—far too many to make their escape over the bridge and through a small gap in the fence of the railway yard, and a terrible fight ensued. By this time, fortunately, the train from Perth came in. It was crowded with railwaymen from Claremont southward, who were going to a mass meeting of their Fremantle branch, held to discuss the trouble. Incidentally, it held also B. and myself. In addition, the trams which reach the station at the same moment also came in crowded, inside and out, on the footboards, hanging on the back, and clinging to the roof—men, women and boys. Hundreds, too, were arriving on foot, and, collecting round the nucleus' from the train, another army of over a thousand gathered...

We saw a swaying movement just at the town end of the footbridge. Crack! Crack! Crack! went the railway fence, and down it came. Off came pickets by the score. Another fence blocked the way. But this was a flimsy one, and seemed to fall of its own accord. Now, a discovery was made that went a long way towards sealing the victory. A number of tool cases — old piano cases really — were distributed through the yard. These were broken open in the search for weapons, and besides other things there was found a vast store of small 'fish plates' — flat pieces of iron, about three inches square, with a large hole in the centre.

The majority of the first attacking party had made their way either up the railway bridge or into the yard, and the remainder were still fighting desperately when the new army surmounted the last barrier—a double row of trucks that extended the length of the yard. W.A. railway trucks are coupled very closely, and are not easy to get through. How the women managed I don't know, but they got through. I can remember helping several across — standing in the truck myself and giving a hand for them to step up — a strain, but not an impossible one. Of course, you'll no doubt wonder in my helping women to place themselves in such danger. Nobody thought of that. All wanted to get into the fight, and I don't think anyone there — at the time — would have thought of preventing the women from going to the battle than they would of preventing them from going into the polling booth to vote for the Labor candidate.

Besides, I forgot to mention an incident that occurred just as the fences were torn down. It was the return of the wounded across the bridge — E Brown, a lumper,

transfixed with a bayonet through the groin, both he and his bearers red with blood; a returned soldier, in uniform, bleeding copiously from a flesh wound; another lumper with his arm pierced; William Renton, the president of the union, with a shirt tied round his battered head, and blood oozing through the folds, Thomas Charles Edwards, who stooped to save Renton from his would-be murderer, was being carried on a picket gate, unconscious from a blow with the butt end of a rifle. He never regained consciousness until the hour of his death on Wednesday night. Others followed, with battered faces, heads and arms. The Fire Brigade took charge of the wounded, and administered first-aid, after which they were run off to the hospital — those who would. Billy Renton went back to the fight.

THE FISH PLATES

The- second army pelted the police, with these terrible fish plates, and soon had the satisfaction of seeing them turn tail and run before the terrible hail, firing a few revolver shots as they went. Immediately several shots rang out from our side, but both parties were out of range — effective range, at any rate — for of the 50 or 60 casualties (I believe 33 were telegraphed, but most of ours were never reported), not one was due to bullet wounds. Besides the three bayonet cases, all ours were from batons or butt-ends of rifles, while the police, in almost every case, showed the tell-tale right-angled imprints of these fish plates. Three of them were knocked unconscious, and taken aboard a Japanese cruiser for medical attention. So far as we could see, most of their wounded staggered off to the shed which served as their barracks—they had none to spare to help them.

To save the situation, the mounted troopers charged down the narrow road inside the railway yard, and swept round a little into the yard itself. They passed a number of workers, however, who drove their horses off with pickets and volleys of fish plates, and had to run the gauntlet of this section once more when they were driven back, as they soon were, by the main crowd. Again the terrible fish plates, which, on this occasion, narrowly missed some of our own men. You may imagine that these fish plates were inexhaustible. Well, there were enough left at the end for two more battles, and the supply was kept well forward by the boys — scores of them. Several of us frequently ordered them off home, but not they! And a mixture! Well-dressed lads, who had come out of church with their fathers, mingled in a communion of saints with the poor little shoeless waifs that sell our "Heralds" in the streets.³ They would not be denied their share in their fathers' battles.

By this time — about 11.15, I think — events moved far more quickly than the pen. The crowd numbered from three to four thousand, and a determined, but rather cautious, advance commenced. The police were ominously quiet, and all sensed a crisis. About fifty yards separated the hostile parties, when it was observed that the police were loading their rifles. The fish plates flew thicker than ever, but the range was rather long, and the soldiers in the crowd did their best to take command and get

³ Most likely the newspaper the author is referring to is the *One Big Union Herald*, the newspaper of the De Leonite Workers' International Industrial Union, which was in print from 1918-1925.

forward men with revolvers to take advantage of the cover that the fence afforded, while the main crowd they wanted to retire. This was impossible, however, from the weight, of pressure behind.

"ASHORE IN FIVE MINUTES"

The troopship Khyber had been working up channel during the past half-hour, crowded with returning men. A cry of "Signallers wanted!" brought forward two men, who climbed on to the water tank — about 80 feet high — and signalled, 'Two returned soldiers bayoneted by police. What do you intend doing?' The reply read, 'Ashore in five minutes.'

This incident disconcerted the police party more than anything else. Inspector Sellinger left the ranks and came over to our front. He took rather a risk, but his object was realised. He asked for our leaders, and a delegation, consisting of McCallum (general secretary of the party), Watts (of the A.W.U.) and Ben Jones, accompanied him back to the pick-up bureau, where the Premier, Colebatch, was trying to look as comfortable as he could.⁴

Colebatch explained that the Riot Act had been read, and that, if the crowd advanced, the police would be compelled to fire in self-defence. McCallum replied that it would be utterly impossible to hold them back so long as the scabs remained on the wharf, and assured Colebatch that he (the Premier) had not sufficient force to stop them; furthermore, that he would not hold himself responsible for the result should the police be foolish enough to fire on the crowd.

The Khyber was now swinging in mid-stream, dead opposite the Premier's position. An angry buzz came from her crowded decks, and one term alone was distinguishable—a fighting word — and, despite its uncouthness, probably the only word in the English language capable of expressing just exactly what was likely to happen should the troops break ship. In any case, their assistance was not required. Colebatch was convinced by McCallum that a volley would not either stop the crowd or save his life if the scabs remained. There was no doubt whatever that McCallum was quite right about it, for at that very moment a party of soldiers were preparing to charge the rear of the police position with motor lorries, which had already been obtained from the warehouses — commandeered, of course.

THE SURRENDER

Colebatch surrendered abjectly. The scabs — or, rather, 'gentlemen' — were already in the launch, and the Premier followed, after promising that no further work would be attempted that day, McCallum guaranteed a safe conduct up the river out of Fremantle, the police, it was understood, being sent back to the barracks.

⁴ Alexander McCallum was general secretary of the West Australian Labor Party at the time, Arthur Watts the secretary of the Western Australian Workers' Union, Walter 'Ben' Jones was the ALP member for the state parliamentary seat of Fremantle, 1917-1921.

McCallum and the other two delegates returned, passing the word that the crowd were to assemble under the bridge. He announced the terms of the armistice, and called on all to assemble on the Esplanade that afternoon. After obtaining solemn assurance from the workers that the police would not be attacked that day, he declared the wharf open. The crowd streamed through, tearing down several yards of fencing to let themselves through, and assembled at the classic meeting place of the wharf — the O'Connor monument. The returned soldiers took charge at first, and formally bound themselves to support the lumpers to victory, and to move in the direction of organising the whole of the returned men of the state in the same cause. A message was waved to the Khyber, advising the outcome of the struggle, and cheers from ship to shore and shore to ship resounded for several minutes.

Billy Renton, his head swathed in an enormous wad of bloody bandages, appeared on the scene, and spoke for a few minutes. Two or three other speeches, short and sharp, followed, and the 'fiery cross' was sent from end to end of the State within another half-hour, the railway telegraph working as it had never done before.

RAIDING THE "BUREAU"

'Esplanade this afternoon!' was the order. Meanwhile, however, a clever job was undertaken. A party of half a dozen men broke open the 'pick-up' office, and seized the register, containing the names of all persons registered for work on the wharves. This proved a terrible weapon, for it virtually made every scab a hostage — his private address being known... Most of them, of course, lived in Perth suburbs. The hated 'discs' — the metal badges served out from the bureau to the men selected for work — were also taken out and emptied into the river, but not before a few were picked out as souvenirs. I got No. 2. The pick-up bureau and the discs, of course, are the machinery of the 'preference to scabs' system. This action took place beneath the eyes of the police, who were 'afraid to arrest a pussy cat.'

The trains brought thousands to Fremantle that afternoon, and Fremantle's own thousands swarmed to the Esplanade. An enormous procession was formed, despite the steady drizzle of rain, and the most solemnly comic scene imaginable ensued. Six hundred returned soldiers took the lead. The barricades at the monument must have represented some ten to fifteen tons of timber, lashed together with chains and iron straps. The chains were broken by main force, and the fragments of the structures flung into the sea. The pick-up bureau was completely gutted everything in it was thrown out through the windows, and, of course, no one thought it worth while to open the latter. A battered office chair was then run up to the head of the flagpole, with the exclamation, 'There goes Colebatch's seat.' The point is that Colebatch, who took over the Premiership a month ago is an Upper House man, and is looking round desperately for an Assembly seat, but can't find one. The remaining barricades were then thrown into the sea. The procession occupied the whole length of the wharf. After reaching the north end, it returned along the road in the shelter of the sheds — a much-needed precaution, as the rain was now falling in sheets. A meeting was held at the Trades Hall, and another in the theatre at night, but after the procession I swore off. Ruby had arrived on the scene shortly after lunch, and would not hear of being left out, rain or no rain, so home was the best place.

THE NEWS SPREAD

The news reached Kalgoorlie and Collie, where monster meetings were in progress during the afternoon, and the result was processions in those towns almost as enthusiastic as at the Port itself. The night meeting at Fremantle demanded the withdrawal of the police, and the Government took the hint. Twenty-four hours later every policeman had left the town — not, however, before another conflict took place; only a minor one, however, involving six policemen, who were foolish enough to venture into the heart of the town. Fortunately there was no road metal available. Not trusting the Government altogether, we took further steps against the police by requesting every, hotel, restaurant and barber to refuse to serve policemen. Everyone complied with the request.

On Tuesday we carried the 'campaign' afield, holding meetings in every suburb. The scabs tried to hold a meeting in Subiaco, but did not even attempt to open. The Mayor of Subiaco mounted a box to announce that there would be no meeting; but, unfortunately, he was mistaken for Williams, the scab secretary. He narrowly escaped a severe mauling by running through a shop.

TERMS OF PEACE

On Monday the Premier decided to reopen negotiations. The Disputes' Committee presented an ultimatum covering every demand of the men — the 'nationalists,' or scabs, were to be withdrawn altogether, the pick-up bureau abolished, 'no victimisation,' Government to relieve distress, and seven-day quarantine system to be adhered to. In return the workers guaranteed continuity of work on the wharves. Following upon a meeting of lumpers on Tuesday morning, when the terms were endorsed, the Government made a show of submitting them to the Commonwealth Government. I see that Watt denies that he had anything with them.⁵

THE DEATH OF EDWARDS

On Wednesday afternoon Edwards died in the Fremantle Hospital.⁶ The news set the ranks of the workers in the city and port buzzing with anger. The members of the Shipping Committee fled their homes, and took up temporary quarters in the hills. The leaders of the movement, on the other hand, went to Fremantle, and that night thousands again crowded the trains to the Port. About a quarter to ten a motor car drew up at the door of the theatre, and a message was sent in for McCallum and the other delegates of the men. The Government had capitulated. All the terms were granted, and, in addition, the Premier was obliged to agree to compensate the widow of the deceased lumper. Work commenced on the wharf on Thursday morning.

⁵ William Watt (1871-1946), Treasurer of Australia under the Nationalist government of the time under William Morris Hughes, was acting Prime Minister during Hughes' absence for the Versailles Peace Conference.

⁶ Thomas Charles Edwards was the first worker to be killed during an industrial dispute in Western Australia. He was only 30 years old and left behind a wife and three children.

Friday was a day of mourning for Labor. The martyr of Sunday was buried in the Fremantle Cemetery. The funeral was attended by over 5000 men and women, and measured a mile and a quarter in length. All traffic on railways and tramways throughout the State ceased for three minutes at 3 pm, the Railways Commissioner being forced to agree, for the simple reason that, his refusal would have made not the slightest difference in the world. This demonstration must have been particularly galling to the 'bourgeoisie,' because the funeral of Sir John Forrest, which took place on Wednesday, attracted relatively slight public interest.⁷

To-day (Sunday) is the final day — at least, for the present — of Labor's Red Week. It is to be a day of rejoicing, and the trains are already swarming Fremantlewards, cock-a-doodle-do-ing their whistles as they go. I don't think I'll bother the 'Day of Rejoicing' with my presence. After all, we're still wage-slaves.

THE CHANGE IN THE R.S.A.

One result of the week's events has been the destruction of the R.S.A. [Returned Soldiers' Association] as a bosses' organisation. The returned soldier wage-earners are determined to end or mend it, and that within double-quick time. On Monday night they held a mass meeting to decide upon action in aid of the lumpers, and an overwhelming majority of lumpers' supporters attended. The 'silvertails,' seeing that they could not run the show, declared the meeting closed, and went away after switching off the lights and removing the switches. Crippled men were left to struggle out in black darkness, but not before they had carried the right resolution...

The one thing that stands out, to my mind, in the whole affair is that the rulers of the world have done very unwisely in teaching the world's workers, or a large percentage of them, not to fear wounds or death. Force can never again be used successfully to overawe Labor. The leaven of returned soldiers in Sunday's crowd worked wonders.

⁷ John Forrest (1847-1918), was a very long-standing politician in both WA and federal politics. He is the great-great uncle of Andrew 'Twiggy' Forrest, a mining billionaire and one of the richest people in Australia.