

The 1908 wood line strikes in Western Australia: causes and consequences

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the 1908 wood line strikes in Western Australia and the role of Southern European workers in these strikes within the context of Honneth's theory of mobilisation. The paper argues against established views of these workers which perceive them as passive participants in culturally divisive anti-union employer strategies and for an alternative evidentiary and theoretical basis for interpreting Southern European worker-employer relations as well as relations within the culturally diverse industrial workforce of the Western Australian goldfields in the early 20th Century.

Key words: collectives and communities, migration, class analysis

INTRODUCTION

In the context of the associational practices of Western Australian goldfields mining labour, the general wood line strike of 1908 was an event which appeared to break the mould. (The 'wood lines' were the logging railways carting wood fuel to the mines). First, for the first time in their history, it brought the mines of East Coolgardie, the centre of Western Australian gold production, to a standstill. This both threw into sharp relief the failure of the mining unions to do so hitherto and extended the realm of the possible in the minds of workers, their leaders and employers, thus subtly altering the industrial climate in the region. Second, the workers who brought the largest Goldfields mines to a standstill in 1908 were, in the main, 'the foreign element', primarily Italian and Slav workers, mostly presumed (including by mining unions) to have been engaged for their compliance. The event thus jolted widely entertained prejudices, including those of union leaders. Third, the strike ended with concessions to the wood line workers, even though they had consistently rejected access to

compulsory arbitration, both before and during the dispute. The wood line workers' success and modus operandi thus provided a stark foil to the ponderous half measures and, for many mine workers, repeated disappointments, of the central institution intended to advance their cause. The event focused attention on the inutility of compulsory arbitration and gave an impetus to those within the wider labour movement who were already disillusioned with the institution.

Taken all together, the 1908 wood line strike had the potential to alter the industrial climate and the status quo in the mining sector in Western Australia of the early twentieth century. However, it also altered the relations among workers in the mining industry, resulting in a recognition of the moral justice of the wood line workers' claims in the long term and the incorporation of the wood line workers within a few years into the trade union movement.

In the short term, however, at the behest of representatives of the mining industry, and consistent with the importance of the first 1908 wood line strike, the state harshly suppressed smaller wood line strikes immediately following the first strike. The severity of the repression demonstrated that both the industry and the state had a strong interest not only in disciplining rebellious wood line workers, but also in protecting the compromise culture of arbitration and the truce between employers and organised labour that compulsory arbitration represented.

For all these reasons, and because it has been a neglected chapter in Australian history, the wood line dispute deserves to be examined in some detail. The dispute also merits attention because it challenges a view of migrant mine labour in early twentieth Western Australia as mere grist to the mill of employers' culturally divisive anti-union strategies and undermines a minor historical orthodoxy threatening to develop around such perceptions. However, in the 21st century, an age of global worker translocation, the 1908 strike is also relevant as a study in migrant mobilisation. Honneth's theory of recognition (2001, 2004), already used by Chimienti (2011) to analyse contemporary mobilisation of irregular migrants in three different locations, is used here to identify the different dimensions of the wood cutters' struggle, both objective and subjective. Analysis within Honneth's framework conflates the economic struggle of the wood cutters for redistribution of resources within a general struggle for 'recognition' or social esteem, and against moral indignities and lack of solidarity.

THE CONTEXT OF THE DISPUTE

Towards the end of the first decade of the twentieth century, Western Australian labour's associational power grew owing to the amalgamation of the Goldfields' mining unions and the improved performance of Labor parties at both State and Federal levels. Labour's market bargaining power improved owing to serious labour shortages on the mines. At the same time, industrial conflict burgeoned dramatically (Segal, 2007).

Notwithstanding labour's improved position, and the greater prevalence of industrial conflict, on the mines, each episode of industrial conflict remained confined to individual mines. Conflict might have become more general had overseas controllers of the mines not curbed the inclination of local mine managers to respond to workers' wage demands with a general lockout (Segal, 2007). Once deprived of the option of a radical response, local managers focused instead on maintaining the status quo or on having the Court adjust wages consistent with declining living costs.

All through their history, the gold mines had preferred wood to alternative fuels for use in operating the mines primarily because of the relative cheapness of this resource (e.g., RC on Forestry, 1904). Local timber-getting operations had the additional advantages of providing some structural timber to the mines, free of the duty and the higher transport costs of imported timber. Monopsonistic relations between the mines and the Firewood companies supplying the wood, also allowed the mines to control some aspects of the production of the wood, whereas they would not have been able to do so for alternative sources of energy. Mining companies, largely through the Chamber of Mines of Western Australia and jointly with the wood supply companies which emerged at the turn of the century, jealously guarded access to mining timber on Crown land and to water sources which were essential to cutting and transporting the wood. They further secured government support for timber tramways, lobbied the Government for sufficient firewood trucks, and generally worked jointly to defend and advance their shared interests concerning the supply of the strategic resource of wood.

The main cost associated with the continued use of local wood that the Chamber was unable to exert direct influence over was that of the labour (primarily cutters, carters and loaders) involved in supplying the wood. As rises in the cost of the wood fuel had the potential to raise the cost of production, the mines attempted to impose some indirect controls on this cost through contractual arrangements with the wood supply companies. These arrangements limited the wood companies' ability to pass on to the mining companies wage rises accorded the woodcutters, except when awarded by the Arbitration Court.

The wood cutting workforce was culturally diverse, though Italians were in the majority. It was also unorganised. In 1903, the Amalgamated Workers' Association (AWA) made the first ambitious attempt to organise the cutters, loaders and carters of the wood lines, and to take their grievances to Court. While it was difficult to organise a culturally diverse workforce, divided, according to the *Westralian Worker*, by language, 'racial distrust, suspicion and hatred', by the end of June 1903, the AWA had established the Broad Arrow-Paddington, Kurrawang and Kanowna unions which, between them had about 500 members, while another 500 woodcutters remained outside the union. Ultimately, this organisational push came to nought, not, however, until after a single disastrous Award was obtained (see below, Arbitration Court, Acc 1095. item 102, SROWA, Benson's evidence). The wood line unions collapsed owing in part to the long delay in getting the cutters' grievances to Court (*Westralian Worker* 18 March 1904), and the poor results of the single court action which eventuated. As well, the wood supply companies responded ferociously to the cutters' demands, intimidating and sacking union representatives (*Westralian Worker* 26 June 1903), and eliminating, in this way, the entire leadership of the Kurrawang union.

The grievances of the woodcutters were many. By 1903, much cutting was from previously 'picked' areas which employers insisted had to be 'cleaned ...out', that is, cleared entirely and not, as before, only 'picked' or selectively cut. With prices remaining the same or, in some cases being lower than when only the good timber was taken, cutters now often had 'to bullock for perhaps a whole day at some old snag of a tree' (*Westralian Worker* 20 March 1903) for very little return. Some cutters resorted to explosives in such situations, sometimes with disastrous results to themselves (*Westralian Worker* 13 March 1903). Besides explosives, the work now required more tools and equipment, which

the wood supply companies expected workers to provide at their own expense. Also, as the wood lines extended further out, some workers had to walk for longer distances to reach their place of work and to return therefrom, and many had to make the trip while carrying their daily ration of water. Often they also had to walk long distances to receive their pay from the company's office.

Dissatisfaction with conditions brought about by these changes was exacerbated by workers' inability to monitor the weighing of the timber they cut and by employers delaying the trucking and weighing of the wood. The longer the wood was left on the line, the less it weighed and the less the cutter was paid. Delays also meant deferred payment. In addition, while lying on the line, the lack of security for the wood meant it could be burnt, pegs determining ownership could be shifted or name tags on pegs washed off, in which case the cutters would not be paid at all for their work. The delay in learning the sum of their earnings compounded cutters' distrust of the various handlers of the wood and of employers' weighing or measuring (*Westralian Worker* 20 March 1903).

The economic injuries that wood line workers suffered were exacerbated by the moral outrage of their disregard by the wider labour movement. Wood line workers were largely isolated from the mine work force, many of whom, they felt, 'would not trouble their brains to find out whether the wood was cut under fair conditions or not so long as the furnaces were kept going to ensure the gold miners constant work' (*Westralian Worker* 20 March 1903). Some miners despised woodcutting, considering it menial, fit for foreigners and ranking lower than any mine work. This was so, notwithstanding the warning of the editor of the *Westralian Worker* that the drawing of 'imaginary lines . . . between workmen of various trades' had led to the 'diabolical' excuses the Amalgamated Miners Association had used to split from the AWA (*Westralian Worker* 9 April 1903).

In Court in 1904, the woodworkers' demands included rises for piece rates for cutters and loaders, free water for all workers, and a tightening of the procedures for assessing the amount of wood. They also argued for different rates for cutting of maiden bush and cut-over bush, (W.A. Court of Arbitration – WAAR – Reports, III 1904, pp. 78–79), a monthly clean-up, and advance payment of 75 per cent of the value of all weighed wood carted. (This was an attempt to get paid sooner and also for the full weight of the wood as it was when cut). They stipulated conditions and rates for day work.

Even before the award had been handed down, woodcutters' representatives returning from the 1904 Perth hearings declared they were not enamoured of Arbitration as they found it: 'Too much red tape attached to it and a good old fashioned strike was much easier to understand as, when it was over, the toiler generally knew whether he had won or lost' (*Westralian Worker* 28 October 1904).

Once handed down, the award, which conferred the existing rate of wages, became notorious in labour circles. The Court had accepted employers' arguments about the adequacy of existing rates of pay, and decided that the men had no cause for grievance and were treated well, and that they were paid generously. Moreover, Burnside, presiding, suggested that had the employers thought to apply for a reduction to workers' wages, such a reduction would have been awarded. The award ensured that woodcutters would refuse to have any further dealings with the Court. It would have reinforced their sense of lack of 'recognition' in Honneth's terms.

By the end of 1904, the last of the woodcutters' unions collapsed. This meant that a body of 1,000 or more workers with a strategic position in the production process was outside the arbitration system. Such organisation as existed was along ethnic or cultural lines and was informal. When local disputes arose, 'Britishers', 'Italian' or 'foreign' workers often acted at cross purposes. The exploitation of these workers increased.

The wood supply companies continued to attempt to reduce the cost of labour by various means, including leaving the wood to dry on the line to reduce its weight, increasing wagon sizes when paying by volume, inflating the value of stores they supplied, and charging for water. These and other practices, together with arbitrary demands by company inspectors which intensified the required work effort, ensured that the culturally diverse wood line workforce would, in time, come together over common grievances, if not a sense of outrage.

The pressing and extreme nature of cutters' grievances as well as workers' early unsatisfactory experience of the Arbitration Court, militated against resolving woodcutting disputes by means of compulsory arbitration. Not inadvertently, the contracts between the supply companies and the mines stipulated that wage rises awarded to wood line labour could only be passed onto the mines if they were obtained by compulsory arbitration. The circumstances were thus rife for an intractable industrial conflict.

The first Wood line strike

In 1908 another attempt to organise the Kurrawang workers, apparently from the grassroots, appeared promising (*Westralian Worker* 12 June 1908). It had not advanced very far, however, before the dispute erupted. According to the Chamber, the strike was most immediately triggered by a pay reduction to some carters working for the Kalgoorlie-Boulder Firewood Company. According to the cutters' delegates, the dispute was born of long standing grievances concerning primarily some 800 cutters. These grievances included dissatisfaction with the rates awarded in 1904, the multitude of company practices that reduced their pay and the highhanded and arbitrary demands of company inspectors. In other words, it was a combination of objective and subjective reasons (indignation at their treatment) that led to the flare up.

Between 1 and 9 July 1908 workers ceased work first on the Lakeside line, then at Kanowna and finally at Kurrawang. For the first time in their existence, the wood supply companies faced a united and determined workforce.

The men demanded increases above the 1904 award rates for all work except truck loading, and stood firm as the firewood supply companies, guided by Chamber advice, focused their efforts on returning the men to work and having the matter referred to the Arbitration Court.

The dispute quickly became politicised. Both Labor and the conservative Newton Moore State government, in part because of the combined votes of the woodworkers, were keenly aware of the electoral implications of the wood line strife. Once it had been settled, the Government and the Labor opposition wrangled over the credit for making the peace.

It was on the day the Kurrawang cutters ceased work that the mining companies gave notice they would shut down the mines simultaneously. Initially only underground operations, later also operations on the surface were to cease (Chamber of Mines – hereafter COM- *Monthly Journal*, 31 July 1908).

The decision to close down the mines was strategic, intended to counter beliefs that the mines would cede increases to the strikers because they feared halting mine operations. The mining unions considered that the mine closure and the laying off of their workforces was intended to increase the

pressure on the strikers. Rumours circulated that the closure had taken place even though the mines had ample wood supplies. To counter the damage from such rumours, the Chamber Executive counselled affected members to attempt 'to keep all possible work going other than the hauling of ore'. To demonstrate that the mines were endeavouring to shorten the stoppage, the Chamber also decided that it was advisable to restart the Associated Northern Mine which had access to wood supplies from a private contractor (COM, Special EC Meeting 14 July 1908, Acc 6137/418). The Chamber further considered, but apparently did not proceed with, a switch to local coal at 32s per ton.

From Perth, Norbert Keenan, a solicitor and formerly a Vice-President and Executive Committee member of the Chamber of Mines, now Attorney General in the Newton Moore Government, cabled the wood supply companies with advice to concede the men's demands 'without prejudice' and to refer the matter to the Arbitration Court for later adjustment. The cutters and their delegates, however, resisted any move to refer the matter to the Court. They continued to do so even in the face of various concessions from the wood supply companies. These concessions included a promise to expedite the Court hearing, making the determination of the Court retrospective, and not cross-citing the woodworkers for reductions. By 14 July, the firewood companies had also conceded free water to the men, and had offered to pay the extra rates asked for on 6ft wood (a small part of the total wood supply) and on engine wood consumed on the lines. They further promised to resolve all other issues within a month by means of an ad hoc local tribunal, and make all terms apply until 31 December, provided the workers returned to work.

Realising the resolve of the workers, the wood supply companies, behind the scenes, approached the Chamber with a proposal to concede 1½d or 2d per ton over existing rates to the cutters and asked the mines to pay this extra cost or, alternatively, to share it with them. The Chamber, however, declined to 'bear . . . any portion of the proposed increase'. It also refused to participate in the negotiations with the strikers. At the same time, and while continuing to maintain the fiction of 'an attitude of strict neutrality' (COM, *Monthly Journal* 1911, p. 423), a Chamber sub-committee dealing with the strike negotiated and conferred continuously with the wood supply companies (COM, Special EC Meeting, 14 July 1908, Acc 6137A/418).

The stalemate led to the inevitable closure of the mines, leaving the majority of the 6,000 strong mine workforce of East Coolgardie out of work. With no apparent prospect of resolving the dispute, predictable public pressure came to bear on the government, much of it directed at having the wood lines ‘nationalised’. In the end, Keenan’s work with the different parties (he was in Kalgoorlie for this purpose) allowed the Premier, once he arrived in Kalgoorlie, to settle the dispute very quickly and to carry off the public relations prize of being the successful conciliator.

At the conclusion of the Premier’s intervention, wood cutters appeared to have gained their original demands, including increases to piece rates, free water, a fixed surcharge over Kalgoorlie prices for stores, and prompt cleanups (i.e., removal and weighing of cut wood) of blocks. What became known as the ‘Moore award’ (*Truth* 18 January 1908), named after the Premier, also stipulated protection from victimisation and a mechanism for resolving future disputes. The overall impression created by this settlement was that the wood line workers’ demand to be treated with respect, their demand for ‘recognition’ in Honneth’s terms, had been met.

The second wood line dispute of 1908

Within weeks of the first 1908 dispute, however, woodworkers were again on strike, first on the Murchison, at Nallan, bringing the Great Fingall Mine to a standstill over a demand for increased cutting rates. The dispute lasted three months. Shortly thereafter, there was also a strike at Kurrawang. The reasons for the new Kurrawang dispute were flagrant employer violations of the Moore award, including failure to provide water and to remove cut wood for months, thereby delaying, reducing and endangering payment. Kurrawang cutters also protested the price of stores—they wanted rates no higher than Kalgoorlie’s—and, because they were cutting in thin bush, they demanded an increase in the piece rates over the Moore award.

Both strikes on this occasion were hampered by cultural divisions between the majority Italian and minority Anglo-celtic workers at Nallan, and between ‘Austrians’ (Slavs) and others (Italians and ‘Britishers’) at Kurrawang. This time, although there was sympathy for their grievances (*Westralian Worker*, 31 August, 13, 20 November 1908), the Kurrawang strikers failed to gain the support of

either their own union (organising on the wood lines had resumed after the first strike), or the labour movement generally. Nor were they successful in extending the strike to other wood lines, though workers on the Lakeside and Kanowna wood line refused to supply wood to companies that normally obtained their supplies from the Kurrawang line. The stoppages also found the companies and Chamber better prepared. With agreements among the mining companies and a 'private understanding' among the three firewood companies concerning distribution of available wood, the mining companies were able to cope with the disruptions in supply. And as the Kurrawang strikers had not had recourse to the dispute resolution clause in the Moore Award, their actions counted as a breach of the agreement irrespective of the merits of their case, and delivered industry the apparent moral advantage.

The Chamber's aim, on this occasion, was, besides breaking the Kurrawang strike, 'to strive for finality', that is, to settle the issue once and for all, including ensuring that workers, hereafter, would respect agreements made, and not resort to strikes. In other words, the Chamber intended to teach the cutters a lesson. After the Chamber requested the Premier to intervene to have 'the law' enforced in relation to the Nallan strikers, six Italian strikers were arrested and, because the Warden refused them bail, had to be 'liberated by order of the Supreme Court' (*Evening Star*, 26 October 1908).

In both the Nallan and the Kurrawang case, the judiciary and the police adopted the harshest measures, breaching conventions and ignoring precedent, to make an example of the men. Eight Kurrawang wood cutters thus eventually received only a sentence of 24 hours imprisonment, but this after spending almost two weeks in custody. Harold Thompson, the secretary of the first Kurrawang Union who was considered the 'ringleader' of the 'Austrians' at Kurrawang (*Evening Star*, 18 November, *Westralian Worker*, 20, 27 November 1908), and Tony Santich, prominent among the 'Austrians', received sentences considered 'both merciless and severe' (*Westralian Worker*, 27 November 1908), the first, three months imprisonment with hard labour, the second one month with hard labour. The magistrate - John Michael Finnerty - justified these harsh sentences with the argument 'that it is necessary to impress upon the foreigners that they must not resist lawful arrest' (*Westralian Worker*, 25 December 1908). After Thompson's conviction, he was removed to Coolgardie, in an

unsuccessful police attempt to obstruct his appeal, which required to be lodged within a three day time limit.

Despite the harsh suppression of the Nallan and Kurrawang strikes, the wood supply sector remained volatile. A strike erupted next among woodcutters at Wiluna, and more significantly, in 1909, yet again, there was trouble on the Kurrawang line. Six hundred cutters ceased work for four weeks over the price of stores, poor working conditions and other issues.

The Chamber of Mines appreciated that the struggle of the woodworkers had changed the industrial climate on the goldfields. Thus the President of the Chamber expected that in the wake of the strike, the task of the Chamber would be more ‘difficult when the wages question in Kalgoorlie came up for revision at the expiration of the existing industrial agreement’ (COM, EC 28 July 1908, COM, Acc 6137A/418). In the end, these difficulties did not materialise, and Kalgoorlie mine workers’ demands, expressed through their unions, remained moderate. According to Chamber of Mines Secretary, Thomas Maughan, the spirit of militancy in Kalgoorlie was curbed by the Broken Hill Strike of 1909, which dealt ‘a severe lesson to labour throughout Australia’ (Maughan to Bramall 7 August 1909, COM, Acc 6137A/306).

Consequences and conclusions

To some in the labour movement, these conflicts illustrated the importance of organisation and the utility of arbitration in preventing such disruptions (*Evening Star*, 4 August 1908). To others, who readily relapsed into a xenophobia which was remarkably absent during the first 1908 wood line strike, the Kurrawang strike was a salutary lesson in the danger of employing foreigners (*Kalgoorlie Miner*, 16 November 1908). However, many union leaders, as well as rank and file members, must have shared the admiration and respect James Cornell, then leader of the surface workers’ union, expressed for ‘the foreign element’ and their methods of operation both in 1908 and later (*Westralian Worker*, 20 November 1911). *The Southern Cross Times* aired similar sentiments when marvelling at how events on the wood lines had upset widely entertained preconceptions: they had showed up ‘the Britisher’ as ‘Mary’s little lamb’, and Italian workers as ‘wolves’, quite lacking in the servility and obtuseness for which they had been engaged (*Southern Cross Times*, 21 November 1908).

Though it requires further research to establish this with certainty, the despised ‘foreign’ wood workers may have inspired other workers to engage in direct action. The incidence of local strikes in the mines increased and among the first to rely on direct industrial action were a group of miners in the Southern Cross district. Many others followed.

But do the events of 1908 and 1909 also challenge the interpretation of the role of migrant labour in the Western Australian mines which argues that the culturally-based preferential employment policies of the mine employers’ prevented ‘the consolidation of mass unionism that had begun to develop in response to the evolution of large scale production’ (Bertola, 1993, 69)? Argument against such views is, of course, not new, harking back as it does to the big debate among labour historians about working class racist ideology and its historical ramifications. As in the great 1980s Australian debate (Curthoys and Markus, 1978; Burgman 1985), the claim is contestable on both evidentiary and theoretical grounds. First, interpretations such as Bertola’s blame employers for divisions which were the product of working-class racism. Second, it assumes a wide prevalence of culturally-based preferential employment policies. Yet there exists considerable evidence countering both assumptions, at least for the period of the early twentieth century. Workers or their leaders were not uniformly or even generally antagonistic to Southern European workers, nor can mine managers be said to have been either equally agreeable to employing a significant body of Southern European workers, or when not opposed to such labour, deliberately selective. Even if selective in this way, their strategic intent has yet to be established, barring Herbert Hoover’s much vaunted tactics on Bewick and Moreing mines in the early part of the century. And, even if it were established that employers intended to be divisive, it is still necessary to demonstrate that they succeeded in this aim to any extent. Relevant to the last point is the degree of unionisation of the Southern European mining workforce (see, for example, *Westralian Worker*, 13 November 1908). It can readily be established that Southern European mine union membership was high in the key district of East Coolgardie (Kalgoorlie). And even if in other districts it was lower than in Kalgoorlie and, more importantly,

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demonstrably lower than of the Anglo-celtic workforce in the same districts, it has yet to be shown that the difference was sufficient to adversely affect mass union action.

The histories of Bertola (1993) and Gregson (2003) suggest or imply a mostly passive Southern European mine workforce in the face of worker racism or employer discriminatory employment strategies. Yet passivity sits oddly with the reluctance of many Southern European workers to break strikes (as, for example, at the Paddington Consols in 1900) and with evidence that they resisted super-exploitation. It is argued here that the events on the wood lines in 1908 are most pertinent to an alternative depiction of these workers and that they should be perceived as actively striving for justice or ‘recognition’ of their social value in the terms developed by Honneth (2001, 2004). Claims as to the divisive effect of preferential employment policies involving Southern Europeans in the mines is further undermined for the study period by the overall small number of such workers as well as by known multicultural work practices of contract workers on the mines.

It is not claimed in this paper that obstacles to mass unionism on the mines did not exist. The danger is, however, that the minor orthodoxy developing around subservience of Southern European workers on the early Western Australian mines, flawed, or at best unproven, as it is, will obscure a more complex reality in which Southern European and other workers played a more diverse role. It is argued here that the more significant obstacles to mass unionism were likely to have been victimisation of unionists and poor union performance. Detrimental to union performance was the mining unions’ infighting which, according to the *Westralian Worker*, wasted resources, alienated members, and allowed the Chamber of Mines, ‘the best organised union in the State’, to manipulate the situation (*Westralian Worker*, 6 January, 31 March 1905).

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