

**The 1929 Timber Workers Strike:
The Role of
Community and Gender**

by

Diane van den Broek

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**School of Industrial Relations and Organisational Behaviour
The University of New South Wales
Sydney 2052 Australia**

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Synopsis

Women's involvement in trade unions and their direct participation in industrial action has been the subject of growing interest for labour historians and industrial relations scholars. Some research has also concentrated on women's indirect participation to paid work. However just as this field of investigation has made inroads into the study of labour history, some have advised a return to 'traditional' concerns of institutional labour history. The following article takes up this debate through an investigation of the 1929 strike in the timber industry. It suggests that hitherto unexplored aspects of mobilisation may be more fully appreciated by analysing those closely associated with strikers and their unions. Specifically it emphasises the role of community and gender relations.

Introduction

On the morning of February 2 1929 some 3,000 timber workers were locked out of around seventy timber mills in New South Wales. Responding with strike action, they remained out for eight and a half months.¹ Unraveling the conditions which enabled them to stay out for this length of time forms the basis of this study. Its central proposition is that a range of individuals, groups and organisations indirectly related to the strike played a significant role in sustaining mobilisation.

Industrial action was concentrated around the urban Sydney mills. The research therefore focuses on those who worked or resided near the mills in Glebe's Blackwattle and Rozelle Bays.² Working conditions in the timber industry, like that on the wharves, were arduous and unpredictable by nature. Although family breakdowns could result from periods of economic or other crisis, many working class families were relatively cohesive and, in hard times, often helped alleviate the suffering of others in the locality. It was in such circumstances of industrial crisis that many Glebe residents mobilised to support the timber strike.

In order to gain a better understanding of the inter-relationship which developed between the social and industrial spheres, the following article presents a thematic account of the strike highlighting the range of individuals, groups and organisations that participated in action, and the types of action undertaken. The opening section locates the

¹ While the terms are not mutually exclusive the terminology is somewhat confusing. Timber workers were locked out, however because they actively resisted the terms of the Lukin award, the dispute was considered a strike rather than a lockout.

² The Queensland Branch of the Timber Workers' Union operated under its own state award, the West Australian branch seceded from the national body and as was the case in South Australia and Tasmania, industrial action in these states was short-lived. Action in Victoria, although as vigorous as that in New South Wales, was different in several ways. Support for a strategy of extension or confinement wavered within both the leadership and rank and file of the Victorian branch of the Timber Workers' Union. Given such indecisiveness, the Victorian Chamber of Manufacturers extended the strike by closing down all building sites. By mid April the strike had led to the unemployment of 20,000 Victorian unionists for whom the union was unable to provide assistance. On June 25 strikers returned to work on what appeared to be employers' terms. The *Timber Worker* attributed union defeat to rank and file inexperience, however the sheer scale of action and increasing unemployment would have made it very difficult for the union to sustain a lengthy dispute. M. Dixon, 'The Timber Strike of 1929', *Historical Studies*, vol. 10, no. 40, 1963, pp. 481, 488; *The Timber Worker*, 29 August, 1929.

strike within a theoretical context, while the following section sets the industrial, political and legal context of the strike and its immediate catalyst – the Lukin award. By analysing the character of protest, subsequent sections demonstrate the critical way unions drew on the strength and activities of various individuals and groups to sustain their own institutions. It highlights the importance of indirect community support, particularly that expressed by women, through their provision of financial and food relief. Similarly it is suggested that women’s deputations to employer and state representatives and activities on picket lines reinforced the morale of strikers and their supporters. It concludes by providing a brief analysis of the factors which brought about the end of the dispute and summarises the main points raised in the research. The article suggests that purely ‘institutional’ strike studies which neglect community and gender relations obscure important contexts which sustain or undermine industrial action. By demonstrating that the character and duration of the strike was not solely dependent on the actions of male timber workers and their labour organisations it reinforces the agency of local working class communities in the maintenance of prolonged industrial disputes.

Theoretical context

‘Traditional’ strike studies have generally focused either on the ‘incidence of strikes and the legal measures for its control’ or examined strike statistics for evidence of trends in industrial action.³ As such, much research has concentrated on industrial relations institutions within which industrial conflict occurs and tends towards description rather than analysis. Whether by design or circumstance, many historical strike studies have also concentrated their analysis at official levels.⁴ In their influential edited work on strikes,

³ J. Iremonger, J. Merritt, & G. Osborne, ‘Introduction’ in J. Iremonger, J. Merritt & G. Osborne (eds), *Strikes: Studies in Twentieth Century Australian Social History*, Angus & Robertson, Australian Society for the Study of Australian Labour History, Sydney, 1973, p.xiii. For a quantitative approach to the study of industrial conflict refer to M. Waters, *Strikes in Australia: A Sociological Analysis of Industrial Conflict*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1982.

⁴ The most cited reason for eschewing a ‘bottom up’ approach relates to the difficulties in uncovering records, particularly if the dispute occurred some time ago. For the most recent example of a ‘middle up’ approach which overlooks the role of rank and file workplace activities and community involvement refer to D. Blackmur, *Strikes Causes, Conduct & Consequences*, The Federation Press, 1993.

Iremonger, Merritt, and Osborne pointed out that significant aspects of disputation, such as the role of strikebreakers and the community, were not incorporated in the studies. Therefore individual studies within the volume variously reflect institutional concerns.⁵

Debate surrounding the pre-eminence of either institutional labour history or social history has been revived. Ironically just as some scholars have identified the need to investigate issues such as the role of the family, community and gender, others call for a restoration of industrial relations institutions to the forefront of research. For example Zeitlin raises concerns that institutions are treated as secondary phenomena responding to interests and identities determined by social pressures and relationships. He suggests that:

relationships between workers and employers at the workplace were shaped less by informal groups, or spontaneous social and economic pressures than by institutional forces: by organisations such as trade unions, shop stewards' committees, business enterprises, employers' associations and the state; and by the rules and procedures governing their interaction, such as collective agreements, conciliation and arbitration boards, wage councils and legislation.⁶

His conclusion that industrial relations is best explained by 'historical divergences in institutional development'⁷ contains conceptual and historiographical weaknesses. Industrial relations institutions do not operate in a vacuum but are the product of historical circumstances which include social, economic and political processes. Indeed the importance of investigating institutional developments is not questioned here, therefore the issue of institutional *and* social history is not one of mutual exclusivity. Rather,

⁵ For example Osborne's treatment of the 1909 Broken Hill dispute concentrated on the internal friction of union leadership, while Dixon's account of the 1929 northern New South Wales miners lockout suggests that union/employer strategies were augmented by local level relief action. G. Osborne, 'Town and Company: The Broken Hill Industrial Dispute of 1908-09' and M. Dixon, 'Stubborn Resistance: The Northern New South Wales Miners' Lockout of 1929-30 in Iremonger, Merritt, & Osborne (eds), *Strikes: Studies in Twentieth Century Australian Social History*, p. xviii.

⁶ J. Zeitlin, 'From Labour History to the History of Industrial Relations' in *The Economic History Review*, Second Series, Vol 40, no. 2, May, 1987, p. 162. For further reading on the institutionalist/rank and file debate refer to R. Price, 'What's in a Name?', *Workplace History and 'Rank and Filism'*, *International Review of Social History*, vol. 34, 1989, pp. 62-77. For important Australian contributions see R. Frances, 'Gender, History and Industrial Relations' in G. Patmore (ed), *History and Industrial Relations*, Australian Centre for Industrial Relations Research, Monograph 1, 1990.

⁷ Zeitlin, 'From Labour History to the History of Industrial Relations', p. 178.

because Zeitlin neglects the social context of disputation, he fails to adequately address the influence of forces which shape those institutions. For instance Zeitlin's mode of analysis overlooks important factors sustaining mobilisation including the way community and gender can influence the course of industrial action.

To further understand the mutually supportive relationship that can develop during times of industrial crisis it is necessary to analyse the concept of community. Community can be used to identify social threads which tie people together or tear them apart, rather than just to static terms of residence, occupation, religion, or language. In this way community is used to denote a sense of shared locality as well as shared class, ethnicity or gender interests. Taksa incorporates the notion of social relations by identifying two aspects of community – the social *form* and the social *experience*. The social form relates to the structure or social bonds and networks which underpin specific groups and how these can develop and change, particularly during events such as strikes.⁸ In the industrial sense then, community can be used as a useful analytical tool to understand how individuals and groups affect and are affected by industrial conflict.

Herman Gutman's pioneering work on community studies in the United States demonstrates that during the 1870s strikes, workers in small towns attracted widespread support from associations based within the local community. As Patmore notes, community studies such as Gutman's have 'enabled labour historians to look at other forms of labour organisation such as co-operatives, friendly societies and social clubs, which may provide the foundations for trade union organisation and assist trade unions to mobilise worker support during industrial campaigns'.⁹ Other Australian scholars such as Ray Markey and Rae Frances reiterate Gutman's desire to broaden the scope of labour

⁸ L. Taksa, 'Community History: Defining the Field', in Community History Program (eds), *History and Communities; A Preliminary Survey. Proceedings of the Community History Program Seminar, University of New South Wales, June 1989*, p.17. For a discussion of community which includes class and gender refer to C.J. Calhoun, 'Community: Towards a viable conceptualisation for comparative research'. *Social History*, Vol 5, No 1, Jan, 1980.

⁹ H. G. Gutman, *Work, Culture & Society in Industrialising America 1815-1919*, New York, 1977; G. Patmore, 'Community and Australian labour history', in T. Irving (ed), *Challenges to Australian Labour History*, University of New South Wales Press, 1994, p. 178.

history by investigating these other forms of organisation. They suggest that by moving beyond a narrowly institutional focus, labour historians may be more mindful of issues such as class, gender and race.¹⁰ The issue of gender is an important one here. For instance because women have historically been excluded from some industries and unions, particularly official positions within unions, many of their contributions have not been adequately recorded. Despite this, various groups of women have at different points in time defended working class standards of living. Humphries notes that battles over reduced working hours were often fought 'behind women's petticoats' and that working class women featured prominently in various struggles of the market place such as bread riots, which predated the strike as an expression of workers' community of interest.¹¹

Research undertaken closer to home and in more recent times has demonstrated that mining auxiliaries and other groups in mining communities have been important contributors to working class strength, a factor which unions would rely upon during prolonged strikes or lockouts.¹² This strength has not been confined to the mining industry. Scates and Leckie emphasise the centrality of women's militancy to the

¹⁰ R. Frances, 'Gender, History and Industrial Relations', in G. Patmore, *History and Industrial Relations*, Australian Centre for Industrial Relations Research, Monograph, No 1, 1990; R. Markey, 'Labour History and Industrial Relations in Australia', in K. Hince and A. Williams (eds), *Contemporary Industrial Relations in Australia and New Zealand: Literature Surveys, Proceedings of the Biennial Conference of the Association of Industrial Relations Academics of Australia and New Zealand*, The Association of Industrial Relations Academics of Australia and New Zealand and Industrial Relations Centre, Victoria University, Wellington, 1987, vol. 1, pp. 169-198.

¹¹ J. Humphries, 'Class struggle and the working class family', *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, 1977, 1, pp. 253-256.

¹² R. W. Connell & T. H. Irving, *Class Structure and Australian Society*, Longman Cheshire, 2nd Edition, 1992, p. 181. Some research which investigates the nature and continuity of gender relations in coal mining communities include A. Metcalfe, *For Freedom and Dignity*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1988, W. Mitchell, 'Wives of the Radical Labour Movement', in A. Curthoys, & S. Eade, & P. Spearritt, (eds) *Woman at Work*, Australian Society for the Study of Labour History, Sydney, 1975; and R. Frances, 'Comrades or Doormats? Some Reflections on Women in Coalmining Communities', *Lilith*, No 2, Winter, 1985. It is also worth noting that miners' wives in northern New South Wales successfully won the right to intervene in the Coal Industry Tribunal hearings over rosters. The ongoing involvement of women is highlighted by their claim that the new rosters would damage family and community life. *Common Cause*, February 1, 1989, p. 3. Research investigating women's role in the 1984 miners strike can also be found in S. Miller, "'The best thing that ever happened to us": Women's role in the Coal Dispute', *Journal of Law and Society*, Volume 12, No 3, Winter, 1985.

organisation and development of two strikes, the Maritime Strike of the 1890s and the 1988 Vestey meatworks dispute.¹³ It is undoubtedly true that retrieving records which relate to such informal networks may be more difficult, particularly if the dispute occurred some time ago. These studies suggest however that because institutional history confines itself to sources where womens' actions are less likely to be registered, important ingredients of disputation can be overlooked.

The following investigation of the 1929 timber strike in New South Wales takes up these theoretical issues. Bitterly fought by both sides and raising the concern of state and federal governments, the strike almost destroyed the Australian Timber Workers' Union. Despite this, little has been written about the dispute and most of what has been written falls within the ambit of institutional history. Apart from a New South Wales Trades and Labor Council pamphlet issued soon after its conclusion, Dixson's pioneering research remains the only published academic work on the dispute.¹⁴ Dixson's study turns on an investigation into the 'strategy of confinement' adopted by union leadership. This involved the confinement of action to sections of the timber industry by keeping unionists at work where an agreement was reached with individual owners. However the analysis does not address various factors which inhibited or encouraged mobilisation. Indeed her conclusion, that the roots of defeat lay within this strategy chosen by the trade union leaders, contains several flaws.¹⁵ If the strategy did prove unsuccessful what was the role of escalating unemployment, deepening depression and a widespread labour perception

¹³ B. Scates, 'Women and Industrial Militancy' in R. Frances, & B. Scates, (eds) *Women, Work and the Labour Movement in Australia and Aotearoa/New Zealand*, Sydney, 1991 and J. Leckie, 'Women in Industrial Action: Some Profiles in a Redundancy Strike in Vestey's New Zealand Meatworks, 1988' in R. Frances, & B. Scates, (eds) *Women, Work and the Labour Movement in Australia and Aotearoa/New Zealand*, Sydney, 1991. Such traditions have similarly been highlighted in numerous other works including L. Taksa, 'Social Protest and the New South Wales General Strike of 1917', Unpublished Honours Thesis, University of New South Wales, 1983; J. Williams, *Anger and Love*, Freemantle Arts Centre Press, Western Australia, 1993, pp. 170-175.

¹⁴ E.R. Voigt, & J. Garden, *The 1929 Lock-out in the Timber Industry, History of the Struggle of the Timber Workers and the New South Wales Trade Union Movement Against Capitalism's SHOCK ATTACK on the workers- THE LUKIN AWARD*, Sydney, 1930; M. Dixson, 'The Timber Strike of 1929' in *Historical Studies*, vol. 10, no. 40, 1963.

¹⁵ Dixson, *The Timber Strike of 1929*, passim.

that a change of government would reverse the Lukin award? More importantly because the myriad activities of those associated with strikers have been largely overlooked, the study raises equally important questions about the dynamics of rank and file mobilisation and union strategy, and their inter-relationship with capital and state mobilisation. For instance contrary to Dixson's estimation that the impact of rank and file militancy on the dispute was low, this study suggests that the introduction of repressive legislation during the strike indicates that action *was* posing a threat to the operation of the state's coercive and disciplinary institutions. Similarly assertions that rank and file actions were 'peripheral' to union strategy, and that unions 'initial plans should have embraced food relief, picketing, propaganda, as well as finance' are questioned here.¹⁶ This research suggests that union leadership made an initial call for rank and file and wider community support and did address the 'problem' of mobilisation.

By utilising sources previously overlooked it is argued here that the character and the duration of the dispute was heavily influenced by wider community action than has so far been suggested in the literature. It demonstrates that the timber strike relied on the actions of those in the formal institutions of industrial relations such as trade unions, political parties, and state apparatus alongside more informal structures based on class, community and family relations. Although they existed in the social rather than the industrial sphere, these latter structures were fundamentally related to the institutions identified. Indeed the scale of mobilisation emphasises that while only 3,000 New South Wales timber workers were officially on strike, many more individuals and groups were agents in shaping this example of industrial militancy.

The Strike: Industrial, Legal and Political Background

The timber strike alone accounted for the loss of over a million working days during 1929.¹⁷ However industrial, legal and political developments which occurred in the years

¹⁶ *ibid*, pp. 487-491.

¹⁷ The 18 month lockout in the northern NSW coalfields also contributed to working days lost during 1929. D.W. Oxnam, 'Strikes in Australia', *The Economic Record*, May 1953, p. 74; *Labour Report*, 1929.

preceding the strike need to be analysed to identify various factors which led to the strike. The expectations of many within the union movement were shaped by Justice Higgins' notion of 'fair and reasonable' wages. However employer determination to reduce costs, the Bruce-Page Federal Government's desire to increase control over industrial matters and the deteriorating state of the economy were all to contribute to a series of industrial disputes.

The timber strike was one of three major disputes which took place in the late 1920s. The economic prosperity of the early 1920s had peaked by 1928 as employers in various industries reasserted their position. In September 1928, when the Waterside Workers' Federation sought a guaranteed minimum wage, the Commonwealth Court of Conciliation and Arbitration (hereafter referred to as the Court), imposed wage cuts and required workers to attend two pickups rather than one. Although Federation officials accepted the award, members in all main ports except Sydney and Hobart took strike action. Several months later in February 1929 a major lockout occurred in the northern New South Wales coalfields when owners presented miners with 14 days notice to accept a 20% wage cut. When they refused, miners were locked out. They remained out for 16 months. Running alongside the lockout in the mining industry was the timber strike. Timber workers may have expressed solidarity for waterside workers and miners over these recent arbitration decisions. However there were specific conditions relating to the timber industry which contributed to the strike in that industry.¹⁸

In 1920 Higgins, the then president of the Court, granted the entire timber industry a forty four hour week. In addition he re-established the 7:10 Harvester skill margins, protected the apprenticeship system and refused to introduce piecework payment systems unless sanctioned by the union.¹⁹ In combination with the 1921 Amalgamated Engineering Union award, which reduced hours and protected craft status, Higgins provided a standard which timber workers sought to preserve and extend. However union members

¹⁸ I. Turner, *In Union is Strength: A History of Trade Unions in Australia 1788-1974*, Nelson, 1976, pp. 81-83; G. Patmore, *Australian Labour History*, Longman Cheshire, Melbourne, 1991, p. 85.

¹⁹ 14 CAR, p. 811.

expectations of a maintenance of Higgins' standard was checked by political, economic and industrial developments. In 1926 Higgin's intention of using the award as a test case was circumvented by an amendment of the 1904 Commonwealth Conciliation and Arbitration Act stipulating that future standard hours be heard by a majority of the Full Court consisting of three judges.²⁰ Concurring with employer demands the restructured Court increased bush workers' hours from 44 to 48 in 1923.

Increased control over industrial relations also reflected in the Bruce-Page Coalition Government's amendments of the 1904 Act in 1928. Increased penalties and sanctions for non-compliant unions allowed the Court greater control over union's internal rules by demanding secret ballots for specific resolutions including strike action. This was to provide a focus for much protest in the early phase of the strike. Also given that several States had already legislated for the forty four hour week, many federally registered unions, including the Timber Workers, were considerably disadvantaged by the Court's increased ability to apply unfavourable Federal awards *vis a vis* State awards.²¹

Product market volatility within the timber industry impelled employers to peruse cost minimisation and maximum control over the production process. The industry experienced a brief period of recession in 1913-1914 when product demand declined as a result of the instability during the Great War. Its fortunes then improved during the general industrial expansion after 1918 but fell off again between 1921-1922 due to increased importation of timber from overseas.²² The introduction of steel and concrete in the building industry also reduced demand for local hardwood. By 1929 Judge Lukin concluded, as did employers, that the timber industry was experiencing the worse

²⁰ Two of the newly appointed judges, Dethridge and Lukin, were later described by the Australian Workers Union as 'nothing less than a tragedy for the working class'. L. Bennett, 'The Federal Conciliation and Arbitration Court in the Late 1920s', *Labour History*, vol. 57, Nov 1989, p. 47.

²¹ G. Anderson, 'The Commonwealth Conciliation and Arbitration Act 1928', *Economic Record*, vol. 4, November 1928, pp. 281-297; M. Perlman, *Judges in Industry*, Melbourne, 1954, 168; D. Carboch, 'The Fall of the Bruce Page Government' in A. Wildavsky, *Studies in Australian Politics*, Melbourne, 1958, p. 124.

²² *27 Commonwealth Arbitration Reports (CAR)*, p. 585.

conditions it had seen since 1923. In making this judgement Lukin rolled back the relatively favourable terms and conditions awarded to the timber workers under Higgins.

Given these developments, employers were in a favourable position to extend the 48 hour bush standard set in 1923 to the remaining mill workers. This was achieved in what became known as the Lukin award.²³ The award, handed down on 23 December 1928, was based on conditions operating in ten 'average' firms from 1921. In setting his award, Lukin attributed the depressed state of the timber industry to the

general depression, the high cost of production, in some cases the cutting out of the better classes of timber, the necessary regulation and restriction of timber cutting by the Forestry Departments, the use of substitutes for wooden materials, the high charges for freight, and in the case of Australian timbers, the increase in recent years in the importation of foreign timber at relatively reduced prices.²⁴

As well as extending the forty eight hour week to mill workers, junior wages were reduced while the permissible ratio of their labour doubled from 1:8 to 1:4. The award reduced minimum wage rates for all timber workers by between five to ten shillings per week. This was at the same time as the Commonwealth Statistician found that the cost of living in New South Wales had increased by six per cent in January as compared to the previous month.²⁵ On consideration that improved machinery reduced previously skilled work, most margins were considerably reduced. For example a dovetail machinist doing cabinet or joinery work faced basic wage reductions of around 6 per cent as well as skill reductions of between six to eighteen shillings.²⁶ Larger timber firms were importing logs rather than sawn planks to take advantage of lower tariffs and many employers had introduced or were contemplating the installation of milling equipment to convert logs to planks. In order to incorporate the introduction of this new machinery, and marking a departure from the practice of considering work skilled if a skilled worker did it, the Court

²³ See 27 CAR, 396ff.

²⁴ 27 CAR, pp. 585-586.

²⁵ Dixon, *The Timber Strike of 1929*, p. 480.

²⁶ 27 CAR, pp. 592-603; Voigt & Garden, *The 1929 Lock-out in the Timber Industry*, p. 9.

reclassified jobs by relocating 'skill' from the worker to the job.²⁷ Encouraging the utilisation of mass production techniques the Court also introduced a 'Butty Gang' system, allowing employers to make a contract 'with any employee or group of employees for payment by results, by piecework, time bonus, extra rates for extra output or any contract for gross payment or otherwise'.²⁸ Immediately after the awards announcement, officials of the Timber Workers Union called a conference with the Australian Council of Trade Unions to devise a strategy to resist its application. Maintaining organisational stability and skilled status was of major concern to unionists as some of their branches were already experiencing some negative effects of the award.²⁹

²⁷ 27 CAR, p. 622; Bennett, *The Federal Conciliation and Arbitration Court*, p. 57.

²⁸ Voigt & Garden, *The 1929 Lock-out in the Timber Industry*, pp.11-12. For further details of the provision for piecework refer to clause 24(1) of the Lukin award.

²⁹ As the minute book shows, early acceptance of the Lukin award in Tasmania led to a 'fading away' of that state branch between February 1929 and March 1936. J. Dargaval, 'The Development of the Tasmanian Wood Industries: A Radical Analysis', Unpublished PhD Thesis, ANU, 1982, pp. 149, 325.

Call to Action

Proceedings of the conference resulted in the formation of a Joint Disputes Committee co-ordinated by the New South Wales Trades and Labor Council.³⁰ Having failed to defer the introduction of the forty eight hour week in discussions with the Timber Merchants' Association a mass meeting of timber workers voted on 3 January to refuse to work the four hours extra stipulated by the Lukin award.³¹ This 'Saturday morning strike' action persisted until 2 February, when 3,000 men employed in about seventy New South Wales timber working establishments were locked out.³²

Action co-ordinated by officials of the union movement provided occasions for displays of mass solidarity and an opportunity to call for wider support. Resistance had escalated by late March when a gathering of between 25,000 and 75,000 strikers and supporters assembled at Sydney Trades Hall to publicly oppose a Court enforced secret ballot gauging workers willingness to work under the Lukin award.³³ Union officials and members opposed the ballot because it asked timber workers whether they were prepared to work under the 'existing award'. Given that strikers had never worked under the existing (meaning Lukin) award, the union argued that the previous 1923 Webb award could be wrongly interpreted as the 'existing award'. Second the ballot encompassed thousands of workers who were not directly affected by the award or participating in industrial action. Finally opposition consolidated when Lukin announced that a large 'No' vote would not change the legality of the strike while a 'Yes' vote would merely fuel

³⁰ ACTU *Minutes*, 20/12/29; New South Wales Labor Council, *Minutes*, 31.1.29. As was the custom, officials from the unions most directly involved joined with the Labor Council to establish the Joint Disputes Committee. Prominent members of the Council included its secretary J. Garden and J. Kavanagh, C. Reeves, M. Ryan, Denford, Bright, Hutt and Voigt. Playing a more minor role in the dispute were officials from the Federal Branch of the Australian Timber Workers Union and unions representing road transport workers, engine drivers and carpenters, coachmakers and furnishing trades employees. Voigt & Garden, *The 1929 Timber Workers Lockout*, p. 14.

³¹ ACTU, *Conference Minutes* 16/1/29; Voigt and Garden, *The 1929 Timber Workers Lockout*, pp. 13-14; *Press Cuttings Book New South Wales Branch ATWU*, ACT.

³² *Sydney Morning Herald*, 4/2/29, p. 11.

³³ The Labor Daily claimed that 25,000 people were in attendance, while Carboch put the figure at 75,000. *LD*, 28/3/29, 1; Carboch, *The Fall of the Bruce Page Government*, p. 130.

public antagonism against unionists. Rank and file opposition toward the ballot was reflected in the fact that out of the 15,000 papers issued, 5,318 out of the 6,000 that were returned had 'No' written on them.³⁴ As part of their protest, ballot papers were publicly burnt in a tin outside Trades Hall as the assembled crowd cheered in support.³⁵ Demonstrators then slowly made their way to Hyde Park to witness a seven foot effigy of Lukin burning at the base of a large fig tree in the park.³⁶ After the effigy the crowd regrouped to hear speeches delivered by various union officials denouncing the Court and the Federal Government. Officials advised workers to prepare for a long struggle and called upon the assistance and organisation of others in the community.³⁷

Community Support

Timber workers participated in the strike through their trade union involvement. Others who formed more spontaneous groups via the formation of Relief Committees and individuals within the local community also provided important networks of support which sustained official union activity. The anticipation of protracted industrial action meant that food relief became a priority. On 13 February women from the Militant Women's Group and the State branch of the Labor Party informed the Labor Council of their plans to provide food and financial relief and organised Relief Depots for efficient distribution.³⁸ Three weeks after the strike had begun numerous Depots established throughout Sydney were able to provide striking families with around £1 per week in food

³⁴ *The Woman Worker*, vol. 1, no. 8, 7/6/29, p. 3; Voigt & Garden, *The 1929 Timber Workers Lockout*, pp. 24-25; *SMH*, 11/3/29, p. 11; Fitzpatrick, *A Short History*, p. 160.

³⁵ *SMH*, 28/3/29, p. 15.

³⁶ Personal animosity directed toward Lukin was based on the widespread labour belief that Bruce was criminalising industrial law by appointing Criminal Court judges, of which Lukin was one, to the Court. Interview undertaken with Joe Weir on 14/7/93.

³⁷ *Labour Daily (LD)*, 28/3/29, p. 1; *SMH*, 28/3/29, p. 15; Joint Disputes Committee Minutes, 12/2/29.

³⁸ For greater detail of the Militant Women's Group refer to J. Stevens, 'Work Among Women in the Communist Party of Australia 1920-1934', *Women and Labour Conference*, vol 2, 1982. Voigt & Garden, *The 1929 Timber Workers Lockout*, p. 19

relief.³⁹ Relief Committees lobbied store owners to donate bread, meat, vegetables, groceries and fish to local families. Even larger grocers, such as Moran and Cato, sent weekly donations of groceries to each depot, while some firms suspended hire purchase payments.⁴⁰

Direct and indirect middle class support for working families illustrate the critical way local conditions developed to draw residents around the strike. Although often viewed as an alternative social structure to class, material here suggests that a ‘community of interests’ developed which included the notion of shared locality as well as shared class interests.⁴¹ Industrial action did to some extent polarise Glebe residents, however contingent factors could also draw sections of the community together around the strikers. For example most Glebe store-keepers at the time operated as small family businesses. The local baker, grocer and ham and beef stores depended on local patronage, therefore lending support to strikers and their families who resided nearby was in their best interest. Although striking families may not have had huge financial backing their potential collective spending power influenced the actions of small business, particularly in this locality where timber mills were central to the local economy.

There is substantial evidence of support for the strike, however community action could cut both ways.⁴² Some shop-keepers’ refusal to assist strikers and the prevalence of strikebreakers questions unanimous support. In these instances more forceful strategies such as boycotts had to be enlisted. For example when a Glebe grocer hired his car to a timber company to transport strikebreakers, local residents boycotted his store and set up

³⁹ *LD*, 19/2/29, p. 5. The first depots appeared in Glebe, Balmain, Pyrmont, Leichhardt, Redfern, Belmore, Annandale and Bankstown. Later in April depots formed in Paddington, Newtown-Erskineville, North Leichhardt, Botany, Enmore, Mascot, Rosebery, Oatley, Ryde, North Sydney, South Annandale and Five Dock. *LD*, April, 1929.

⁴⁰ Voigt and Garden, *The 1929 Timber Workers Lockout*, p. 21.

⁴¹ R.A. Wild, *Australian Community Studies and Beyond*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1981, p. 11.

⁴² Interview undertaken with Mary Piesley on 11/8/93. A. Johnson, *Bread and Roses. A personal history of three militant women and their friends 1902-1988*, New South Wales, 1991, p. 22.

pickets outside it.⁴³ The car was withdrawn within a week. Public listings of boycotted establishments in the *Labor Daily* similarly encouraged local businesses to support striking families.⁴⁴ Other associated factors led several store owners to lodge complaints with local authorities about the activities of police and strikebreakers. Such complaints prompted Glebe Council to attempt to restrict the frequent procession of non-union labour and police along neighbourhood streets and footpaths. Whilst stating that police protection was needed due to the large numbers of pickets which gathered around local mills, the Acting Commissioner refused to acknowledge any inconvenience to the local community.⁴⁵ Such action, however motivated, could only add to the morale of strikers and their supporters.

Women's Agency

Morale was further reinforced when women refused to support or allow the New South Wales Labour Council to participate in the Industrial Peace Conference during February 1929. The Bruce Government organised a series of conferences after the Associated Chamber of Manufacturers raised concern about the prevalence of industrial disturbances. Employer issues canvassed at the conference related to the competitiveness of Australian industry, industrial legislation, wage determination and payment by results. Conversely issues raised by the Council, involved the withdrawal of 'scabs' from the waterfront, repeal of anti-working class laws and the release of political prisoners such as the

43 The utility of enlisting strikebreakers from outside the immediate area has been a popular tactic used throughout other protracted disputes such as the 1917 General Strike and more recently during the Australian Pulp and Paper Mill strike, and Glebe residents such as Joe Weir, Ray Blissett and Mary Piesley were convinced that scabs did not live in the local area. While this remains unconfirmed due to an inability to locate any documentation on strikebreakers, it is a possibility that local unemployed men were eager to replace striking timber workers. H. Thompson, 'The APPM Dispute: The Dinosaur and the Turtles vs the ACTU', *The Economic and Labour Relations Review*, Vol 3, no 2, December 1992, p. 157; L. Taksa, 'Social Protest and the New South Wales General Strike', Unpublished Honours Thesis, University of New South Wales, 1983, p. 57. Interview Joe Weir, Ray Blissett and Mary Piesley.

44 Feb-Oct 1929.

45 *Glebe Council Minutes*, 1/8/29, 15/8/29.

Seamen's Union leader Jacob Johnson.⁴⁶ However, Jock Garden and other Council delegates withdrew from the conference even though they personally favoured continued involvement. Their withdrawal came soon after a noisy protest of around twenty timber workers' wives and Women's Group members attended the Town Hall to disrupt the inaugural day of the conference. Their determination to have delegates withdraw until the dispute had been satisfactorily resolved, and their accusations that Garden was a class traitor may not have been the sole reason for withdrawal but their actions were duly noted in labour circles.⁴⁷

Outspoken resistance to the ideological advances of the Industrial Peace Association is a further example of the character of their protest. Several weeks after the Industrial Peace Conference, a meeting of women associated with the Industrial Peace Association convened to propose legislation preventing strikes and lockouts in Australian industry. The Association's major objective was to secure legislation requiring a ballot of women over twenty one years of age being taken before industrial action be considered.⁴⁸ As Leckie's study of Vestey's meatworks similarly demonstrates, employer strategies designed to break strikes often rely on pressuring the wives of (male) workers.⁴⁹ A leaflet distributed to timber workers' wives by the Peace Association illustrates the maternal nature of the plea for industrial peace. Part of it reads

The mothers of Australia cannot stand idly by while Australia's prosperity and fare (sic) name are menaced. We call on all women to attend this meeting and register their protest against the cruel wrong which is being done to helpless children by the policy of strikes.⁵⁰

Timber merchants' release of the addresses of striking families to the Peace Association bears witness to this time honoured technique of employers mobilising women as agents

⁴⁶ R. Markey, *In Case of Oppression, The Life and Times of the Labor Council of New South Wales, 1871-1991*, Pluto Press, 1994, pp. 314-316.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, pp. 316-317; Interview Edna Ryan; NSWTLIC, *Minutes*, 20/2/1929, 21/2/29; NSWTLIC, *Bulletin*, no. 23, 28/2/29, p. 3.

⁴⁸ *SMH*, 18/3/29, p. 13, 20/3/29, p. 17.

⁴⁹ Employers sent several letters to the wives of strikers in an attempt to apply domestic pressure for a return to work. Leckie, *Women in Industrial Action*, pp. 91-92.

⁵⁰ *ATWU, Press Cuttings Book*.

of the company. However despite its peaceful intentions, the gathering erupted into ‘one of the most uproarious meetings of women that have taken place in Sydney ... eclipsing any ... as a demonstration of personal and class hostility’.⁵¹ Prominent women speakers’ including Adela Pankhurst Walsh, were either howled down or drowned in a chorus of ‘Solidarity For Ever’ by women who intended to show their support for the strike. The meeting quickly disbanded, but not before one young woman concluded the meeting by mounting a chair to urge timber workers’ wives to ‘show them how we can run a show. We don’t scab on our men, and we don’t want to’.⁵²

Later in May, between twenty and thirty timber workers’ wives and members of the Militant Women’s Group delivered a resolution to the Sydney and Suburban Timber Merchants’ Association stating that

wives of locked out timberworkers and other working class women, indignantly resent your statements in the press to the effect that timberworkers are running back to work. This is a deliberate attempt to try to break the spirit of the men. It is clear from your statements that you are annoyed at the women assisting to back up the resistance of the men in the fight. We assure you that the wives of the timberworkers will continue to use all their efforts to prevent the men surrendering to your terms.⁵³

The foregoing action demonstrates that from the outset support for industrial militancy went far beyond the provision of relief. Indeed some working class women were determined to construct a distinct type of protest as they became increasingly politicised by the strike. They also illustrate the diverse character of protest and provide a contrast to assumptions that women naturally become the allies of employers when industrial action occurs.⁵⁴

Attempts by strikers’ wives and families to restrain the activities of strikebreakers was also apparent throughout this dispute.⁵⁵ When clashes between picketers and

51 *The Woman Worker*, 7/4/29, 4; *SMH*, 20/3/29, p. 17.

52 *ATWU, Press Cuttings Book*.

53 *LD*, 9/5/29, p. 5.

54 For an example of employer perceptions see Leckie, *Women in Industrial Action*, passim.

55 By early April employers had engaged over 1,000 strikebreakers. While the Timber Combine advertised for strikebreakers in rural districts of New South Wales as well as in other states, New

strikebreakers took place 'the women were just as strong as the men ... they didn't mess about'. Indeed during the pickets some local women attempted to drive strikebreakers out of the neighbourhood by charging at them with fence palings in their hands yelling 'you scabbing bastards' as they filed past.⁵⁶ By June mass picketing replaced the strategy of individuals picketing their own yards. Police protection was stepped up as strikebreakers faced hundreds of strike supporters who waited outside the yards to jeer as strikebreakers arrived and left the yards to board trams for home.⁵⁷ Walking under heavy guard towards their tram-stops, strikebreakers were often 'menaced and stones were thrown ... as ... women of the locality tried to spit in the faces of the men as they walked past'.⁵⁸ Other local women threw dirty dish water over strikebreakers, with one man alleging that a woman picketing outside Hudson's mill scratched him with a large cork that had a number of needles spiked from it.⁵⁹

In order to sustain action strikers and their families depended on considerable financial support. The indirect support of many women has already been noted. However their direct involvement as paid workers should not be forgotten. For instance the female dominated Gramophone Workers' Union made relatively generous donations of three shillings weekly per member throughout the strike. Ironically the 20,000 strong largely male Australian Workers' Union membership initially refused financial assistance to 'alleviate the distress among the women and children affected', and when they did eventually offer support it was considerably less than that provided by the Gramophone

Zealand, U.S.A. and Europe, skilled strikebreakers were at a premium. On 24 April timber merchants therefore requested the Court enforce clause 4 of the Act by forcing 39 skilled machinists back to work. Despite the ruling that the machinists must present themselves for work the following Monday or else be fined £50, they refused to return to work or to pay their fines. NSWTLG, *Yearly Report and Balance Sheet for the year ending December 21st, 1929*, Sydney, 1930.

56 Interview Ray Blissett.

57 As already mentioned it appeared that most strikebreakers came from outside the immediate area.

58 *SMH*, 20/7/29, p. 15.

59 Interview Ray Blissett; *SMH*, 27/8/29, p. 9.

Workers' Union whose membership only numbered around 200.⁶⁰ Revenue raised through weekly union levies was augmented by women from the Relief Depots selling coupons at workplaces and collecting outside public venues such as football and boxing stadiums, hotels, shops and theatres.⁶¹ Local activities ranging from evening entertainment, parties, fancy dress balls, euchre parties, motor drives, to the annual Queen of May competition also raised revenue, and contributions were by no means meagre. The May Queen competition alone was to contribute just under £1,000 to strikers and their families.⁶²

Political Solutions

The scale of action and presence of strikebreakers meant that numerous clashes occurred between pickets and police.⁶³ Demonstrations intensified as the New South Wales government enlisted armed and mounted police to control picketers, and the Bavin Government amended the *Crimes Act 1900 (NSW)* to broaden the definition of unlawful procession and re-define mass picketing as a criminal act.⁶⁴ Despite the amendments open displays of solidarity continued throughout July, August and September.⁶⁵ However

⁶⁰ Such contributions to the Timber Workers' Relief Fund ensured that locked out married and single men received weekly relief of at least £2 and £1 respectively. Total collections amounted to over £123,000. *SMH*, 6/3/29, 17; *LD*, 4/5/29; Voigt & Garden, *The 1929 Timber Workers Lockout*, p. 19.

⁶¹ Based on the Labor Daily's calculations funds derived from the levy averaged around £400 monthly from February until September. *LD*, Feb-Sept 1929; *The Picket Line*, no. 11, 28/8/29, p. 1.

⁶² *Labor Council Bulletin*, 21/2/29; *Labor Daily*, 18/6/29, p. 5, 2/5/29, p. 7; *Pan Pacific Worker*, Vol 11, no 5, 1/4/29; *The Picket Line*, no. 1, 19/6/29.

⁶³ On 17 July hundreds of police attended a demonstration of between 300 and 400 picketers outside Hudson's mill. The following day over 500 police again attended a crowd of between 1,000 and 8,000 picketers at the same mill. *SMH*, 20/7/29, p. 15; *WW*, 2/8/29, p. 15.

⁶⁴ From the employers viewpoint this was a timely development given that the legislation was enacted two months after the police were unable to convict seven union officials on charges of 'molesting and intimidating' Hudson's workmen. *New South Wales Parliamentary Debate*, Session 1929-30, vol. 118, 26/9/29, p. 382; *SMH*, 7/8/29, p. 15; *New South Wales Police Gazette Index*, 1929, p. 693.

⁶⁵ On 29 July between 6,000 and 8,000 men and women assembled at Wentworth Park to hear speeches relating to the progress of the strike and to show support for those arrested. In the next few days numerous gatherings of between 2,500 and 3,000 timber workers and supporters rallied in protest as mass picketing continued throughout August. On one occasion as many as 6,000 men and women assembled at a mass picket outside Hudson's mill, resulting in the arrests of fourteen picketers. *LD*, 29/7/29, p. 1; *WW*, 2/8/29, p. 6.

labour perceptions that a Labor victory at the October federal election would strengthen their cause, began to overshadow strike action.⁶⁶ Rank and file members of the union reluctantly agreed to the Disputes Committee's call for a general return to work. Abiding by Committee recommendations, members also agreed to delay their return until after the election so as to assist the Labor Party's chance of victory.⁶⁷

Conclusion

Solutions favourable to striking families were not forthcoming as the previous eight and a half month dispute left timber workers, their organisations and supporters financially and psychologically broken. Their inability to sustain action any longer and the unfavourable settlement which ensued can be explained by multifarious economic, political and social factors.

The availability of strikebreakers and the fact that many were reluctant to assist striking families suggests that there was never unanimous support for the strike within the community. Circumstance could however lead to a greater cohesion developing within the Glebe area and there were numerous examples of cross-class support for the strike. This article has presented evidence which suggests that informal structures based on class, community and gender relations played an important role in the longevity of the 1929 strike. Underpinned by timber workers' expectations of the retention of working conditions established in the early 1920s, working people defied not only the Lukin award, but also the perceived class bias of state institutions. The huge disparity in the resources at the disposal of the opposing sides and the escalating confrontation which resulted provide

⁶⁶ For instance monthly 'bob-in' fund contributions dropped from just over £400 in June to just over £200 in September/October. *LD*, June-October, 1929.

⁶⁷ On 17 October, five days after the Labor Party won a landslide victory, timber workers officially returned to work. The strike was never settled however as many timber workers were not re-employed in the mills. Although strikers applied for reinstatement, few were re-employed in their mills and most were either never to return to the industry or to wait a number of years to find an employer who would take them back. Voigt & Garden, *The 1929 Timber Workers Lockout*, pp. 40, 43; Allen Taylor Pty Ltd, *Minutes of Directors Meeting*, 17/10/29; *The Picket Line*, No 18, 17/10/29, p. 2.

explanations as to why industrial action spread so readily within the industrial and the wider social sphere.

The scale and diversity of formal and informal mobilisation is reflected in the numbers participating in the ballot burning and in the character of subsequent events which occurred throughout the strike. Most particularly evidence presented here reveals that timber workers' wives and families, as well as women who associated with the various Relief Committees, the Militant Women's Group and the Labor Party played a significant role in the development of the dispute. Financial and other material support was crucial as were the numerous occasions when working women refused to buy or allow others to buy blacklisted produce. Protests over the Labor Council's continuing participation with the Industrial Peace Conference, resistance to the ideological advances of the Industrial Peace Association and their activities on the picket lines provide examples of how many working class women helped to sustain action. Crucially trade union officials drew on the strength and activities of these networks to sustain their own institutions in turn sustaining industrial militancy for its eight and a half month duration.