

# INTRODUCTION

## Foot Soldiers for Capital: why focus on the RSL?<sup>1</sup>

*[W]hat is significant to realise now is how every corner of that little suburban house must have been impregnated for years with the very essence of some gigantic and sombre experience that had taken place thousands of miles away ... There was no corner of the house ... that was not inhabited by the jetsam that the Somme and the Marne and the salient at Ypres and the Gallipoli beaches had thrown up.*

George Johnston, *My Brother Jack*

George Johnston's description of the tiny suburban Melbourne cottage in which David and Jack Meredith grew up evokes a fitting allegory of Australia in the aftermath of World War One, where the repercussions of overseas military involvement were clearly palpable for decades after the last shot was fired.<sup>2</sup> The stark absence of so many young men who had left in a blaze of national pride and were now never to return; the disturbing presence of those who *had* come back with manifest signs of the ordeal through which they had suffered; the terrible poverty into which many soldiers slid as pre-war promises became post-war repudiations; all were jarring reminders of a 'debt' for which the home front could, or would, never adequately compensate. It was just as Mickey Flynn, Boer War veteran and boxing troupe manager, had warned his employees. 'Don't any of you go taking any notice of the Government's promises', he said, because '[t]hey will tell you anything to get you in but when you "do your bit" as they call it, you will soon be forgotten and so will the promises'.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Returned service organisations throughout Australia have had a plethora of names and name changes. To avoid confusion with other, sometimes more radical, returned soldier organisations, the acronym 'RSL' is used throughout this thesis to denote State branches and sub-branches of the federally recognised Returned Sailors and Soldiers' Imperial League of Australia, established in 1916. See L. Hills, *The Returned Sailors & Soldiers' Imperial League of Australia: Its Origin, History, Achievements and Ideals*, part 1, Southland, Melbourne, 1938.

<sup>2</sup> G. Johnston, *My Brother Jack*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1995 (first published 1964), pp. 11-12.

<sup>3</sup> A. B. Facey, *A Fortunate Life*, Penguin, Ringwood, 1981, p. 235.

In a bid to capitalise on the collective potential of returned men and to win working class soldiers away from working class institutions, leading members of the Returned Sailors and Soldiers' Imperial League of Australia (RSL) placed the image of brave, altruistic, conservative returned soldiers at the centre of national post-war society.<sup>4</sup> They constructed an ideological narrative that gave primacy to soldier sacrifice in the protection of Australia's democratic and egalitarian traditions, in direct opposition to labour movement claims that the successful campaigns against conscription had narrowly averted a military dictatorship over the working class.<sup>5</sup> While purporting to represent the interests of all returned men, the 'brass hats' who led the RSL used their role as self-appointed guardians of the 'Anzac legend' to bolster the place of veteran leaders in national discussions about the subsequent course of Australia's development.<sup>6</sup> Despite expressions of concern about the level of repatriation benefits for ordinary soldiers, the RSL leadership worked much more assiduously to convince governments that it had an important role to play in directing society towards 'desirable' national outcomes – ensuring industrial peace, opposing radical politics and reinforcing conservative values. Very few politicians disagreed.

Although Kristianson has detailed the degree to which RSL 'brass hats' had considerable access to the holders of high political office, it is equally important to understand the relationship between the RSL leadership and its membership.<sup>7</sup> Returned soldiers came from all classes, occupations, religions, localities and political affiliations and this provided the conservative leadership of the RSL with unique access to almost every group in society.<sup>8</sup> Ex-servicemen were gradually re-absorbed into civilian life as

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<sup>4</sup> S. Alomes, *A Nation At Last? The Changing Character of Australian Nationalism 1880-1988*, Angus and Robertson, North Ryde, 1988, pp. 67-8.

<sup>5</sup> K. Buckley and E. Wheelwright, *False Paradise: Australian Capitalism Revisited, 1915-1955*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1998, pp. 19-25.

<sup>6</sup> 'Brass hat' was a common colloquialism employed to denote officers. As will be demonstrated in Chapter Three, many ex-servicemen viewed 'brass hats' and the RSL leadership as one and the same, and not without justification. See also Thomson's description of the RSL leadership where it was portrayed as dominated by 'influential ex-officers from the business and professional class'. A. Thomson, *Anzac Memories: Living with the Legend*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1998, p. 121. Re the nature of the 'Anzac legend', see K. S. Inglis, 'The Anzac Tradition', *Meanjin*, March 1965; G. Serle, 'The Digger Tradition and Australian Nationalism', *Meanjin*, June 1965; M. Roe, 'Comment on the Digger Tradition', *Meanjin*, September 1965; K. S. Inglis, 'The Australians at Gallipoli-I and II', *Historical Studies*, vol. 14, nos. 54 and 55, 1970. See Chapters One and Three for further comment on Anzac mythologising.

<sup>7</sup> G. Kristianson, *The Politics of Patriotism: The Pressure Group Activities of the Returned Servicemen's League*, Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1966.

<sup>8</sup> B. Gammage, *The Broken Years*, Penguin, Ringwood, 1975, pp. 280-2.

church-goers, sportsmen, school teachers, farmers, small and big businessmen, and workers of all political hues. As such, those returned soldiers who supported the conservative side of politics, and who maintained links with an RSL sub-branch, formed a potentially critical conduit for RSL propaganda into wider society. In particular, conservative workers who embraced RSL policies had a special place in ‘brass hat’ plans to influence the Australian labour movement.

From its inception, the RSL leadership sought to fashion an organisation in its own image. As a counterweight to the political and industrial organisation of the labour movement, the RSL provided the Australian ruling class with a political structure through which to organise conservative programmes, one that I argue was far more organic than that developed by the Nationalist Party in the interwar period.<sup>9</sup> RSL meetings provided important organising centres for right-wing ideologues, passing ideas from the predominantly ‘brass hat’ leadership, through a conservative working class cadre to the wider working class. Just as the union movement provided a pole of attraction for those who wanted to, even in a limited sense, oppose the capitalist system, so too did the RSL provide a place where conservative employers and workers could meet to hear re-affirming ideology, discuss current political questions and plan strategic alliances in support of the *status quo*. Labour movement appeals to working class returned servicemen to rejoin their unions were countered by RSL claims that ex-soldiers were better served by cleaving to each other, much as they had on the battlefields. According to RSL propaganda, those officers who had commendably led them through the war would equally lead them in peace time, thereby ensuring that returned soldier commitment to the defence of the Australian nation would not end with the armistice. In 1917, Senior Chaplain Dean Talbot, an early President of the NSW RSL, described the aims of the newly-formed RSL thus:

[t]he men must be encouraged to help themselves and to help one another ... Such an Association as ours can be a great power for good in the community if it is wisely guided. We must perpetuate in the life of the nation the principles for which we have fought ...<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> See P. Cochrane, *Industrialization and Dependence*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1980, pp. 76-102.

In the views of such men, dependable ‘diggers’ would mobilise against the disloyalty and industrial turmoil on the home front that had let them down in the trenches. In this battle, returned soldiers would be both practical and ideological warriors, serving as strike breakers during industrial disputes and spreading the conservative political doctrines of Australian nationalism, industrial pacifism and ‘racial purity’. As Thomson argued, at the very least it would get them off the streets.<sup>11</sup>

One of the most prominent aspects of the RSL’s allegedly ‘non-political’ agenda was its vigorous embrace of the White Australia policy. At Federal, State and sub-branch levels, RSL propaganda maintained that racial purity was one of the principal ideals for which soldiers had fought. As Serle maintained, the digger legend was largely crafted by conservative sections of society who developed ‘a right-wing variation of Australian nationalism ... based on the new patriotism and pride of race of the Protestant middle class’.<sup>12</sup> Predominantly Protestant and non-working class, the RSL leadership was a key protagonist in this ideological project. It was able to link left-wing ideology with ‘foreign’ and ‘revolutionary’ influence and, in so doing, constructed a case for ‘eternal vigilance’ in the administration of immigration. As Kristianson argued, ‘Ever since its formation ... the League has put to the Commonwealth government demands with regard to defence, immigration and creeds and organizations seen as subversive to the maintenance of the Australian way of life.’<sup>13</sup> Every Federal RSL Congress of the interwar period passed at least one motion that criticised successive Federal governments for alleged laxity in their policing of non-British immigration. In this way, returned soldiers were construed as the only proven defenders of the Australian nation. The RSL’s incessant and faintly hysterical propagandising in this area is epitomized by the following motion, entitled ‘Influx of Aliens’, which read:

Congress affirms that in pioneering this young country of Australia only the best citizens are required and desires that the Commonwealth Government should continue its policy of strict prohibition against those

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<sup>10</sup> Cited in P. Sekules and J. Rees, *Lest We Forget: The History of the Returned Services League 1916-1986*, Rigby, Dee Why West, 1986, pp. 22-3.

<sup>11</sup> Thomson, *Anzac Memories*, p. 123.

<sup>12</sup> G. Serle, ‘The Digger Tradition and Australian Nationalism’, *Meanjin*, June 1965, p. 156.

<sup>13</sup> Kristianson, *Politics of Patriotism*, p. xxviii.

of criminal tendencies, mental deficient, and those of anti-British views.<sup>14</sup>

That an elite-dominated organisation such as the RSL could be at the forefront of agitation for non-British immigration restriction contradicts the common assumption that working class people have been the chief agitators for, and beneficiaries from, the White Australia policy.<sup>15</sup> Although hostile to labour agitation for better wages and working conditions, the RSL leadership preached adherence to racial homogeneity as a pre-condition for decent Australian living standards and, in the process, encouraged its working class members to embrace exclusionary immigration policies, both at a national and local level. During the 1920s, it lost no opportunity to lobby for the cessation of southern European immigration to Australia. In retrospect, it might be argued that the efficacy of this lobbying at Federal level was not great because non-British immigration continued unabated until the Depression. Yet, this study will demonstrate that restriction was not the RSL's only objective. Its contribution to the mid-1920s hue and cry about the 'dangers' of southern European immigration was, I argue, also designed to penetrate labour movement politics at a local level. It is the nature and extent of that influence which has received little attention in the existing historiographies of racism and the RSL.

It is at this point that a focus on the RSL begins to yield important insights into the dynamics of racism in Australia, raising hitherto unaddressed questions about the motivations behind *ruling class* agitation for the White Australia. Support for the White Australia policy in the interwar years was most commonly described as having achieved a level of consensus unparalleled by any other set of ideas to have become dominant over the last century, an assumption that is arguably one of the most successful bourgeois frauds of Australian history. As a consequence, attempts made by unionised workers to overcome racial animosity have been neglected by Australian labour historians, who have shown much more curiosity about instances of racist division that

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<sup>14</sup> Letter, RSL Federal Executive to Prime Minister, 9 December 1929, RSL collection, MS 6609, Item 4739, National Library of Australia.

<sup>15</sup> This is a long historiographical tradition but see, for example, W. K. Hancock, *Australia*, Jacaranda Press, Brisbane, 1966 (first published 1930), p. 61; A. C. Palfreman, *The Administration of the White Australia Policy*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1967; C. A. Price, *Southern Europeans in Australia*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1963 and *The Great White Walls are Built*, Australian

have sporadically flared among working people and the economic, political and social causes of such enmity. Dissenters to the White Australia 'ideal' were seemingly limited to short-sighted employers who put their desire for cheap labour ahead of the 'national interest', and small groups of 'red-raggers' who spouted 'lunatic' ideas about workers having no country. While wide-ranging discussions and disagreements have occurred over virtually every other aspect of Australian history – arbitration, free trade, women's oppression – similar debates about the origins and dynamics of racism and the White Australia policy were rare until the 1970s and 1980s when, amidst debates surrounding the role of Australian imperialism and militarism in Asia, the dismantling of the White Australia policy and rising agitation around the continued oppression of Aboriginal people, some historians began to strip away the arguments of the apologists for the racist nature of the White Australia policy. Of particular relevance to this study was Verity Burgmann's healthy scepticism about the notion that employers supported the White Australia policy to maintain a high wage economy.<sup>16</sup> In so doing, she was tackling an historiographical truism of many decades' standing.

Published in 1923, Myra Willard's work was equivocal about what role, if any, might be assigned to the Australian working class in the enactment of the White Australia policy. On the one hand, she acknowledged that support for immigration restriction was virtually unanimous among members of the first Federal Parliament and that the interests of Australian nationhood were more important than the industrial demands of labour organisations.<sup>17</sup> According to Willard's investigations, Australia's ruling elite was only motivated to support immigration restriction for more sophisticated political motives involving nation-building and cultural heritage. As Edmund Barton articulated to his colleagues in Parliament, the legislation was necessary:

not only for the reason generally urged, because while there may be sympathy with the labour aspect of the question, I have yet to say there

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National University Press, Canberra, 1974; A. Markus, *Fear and Hatred: Purifying Australia and California 1850-1901*, Hale and Iremonger, Sydney, 1979.

<sup>16</sup> V. Burgmann, 'Capital and Labour' in A. Curthoys and A. Markus (eds), *Who Are Our Enemies? Racism and the Working Class in Australia*, Hale and Iremonger, Neutral Bay, 1978, p. 33.

<sup>17</sup> M. Willard, *History of the White Australia Policy to 1920*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 1974 (first published 1923), p. 203.

are grounds even more conclusive than those of labour for the prevention of this kind of immigration.<sup>18</sup>

On the other hand, she claimed that, in keeping with the noblest British democratic traditions, the Australian Parliament served the people and, for this reason, had allowed popular agitation for restriction to sway its legislative hand.<sup>19</sup> In short, she placed an historical ‘each-way bet’ about the political impetus towards immigration restriction, but it was her argument that the working class was the most racist section of Australian society that was widely accepted and repeated uncritically by historians for many decades.

In the 1970s and 1980s, historians such as McQueen, Burgmann, Evans, Saunders and Cronin, Price, Curthoys, and Markus produced a range of studies that attempted to provide more complex and convincing explanations of the continued existence of racism in Australian society, by proposing a range of analyses about the nature and dynamic of racism against Aboriginal, Asian and Melanesian people. However, of all these historians, only Burgmann attempted to make a systematic case for the involvement of the ruling class in Australia’s racist past.<sup>20</sup> In her doctoral research and in a range of historical polemics against Professor Geoffrey Blainey’s campaign to restrict Asian immigration, Burgmann argued that a continuing focus on working class racism had let Australian employers off the hook. She was critical of attempts to use economic justifications against cheap labour to ‘whitewash’ the labour movement from the stains of White Australia, but she was equally hostile to the

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<sup>18</sup> *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 1st session, 1901, p. 3503.

<sup>19</sup> Willard, *History of the White Australia Policy*, pp. 88-9.

<sup>20</sup> H. McQueen, *A New Britannia*, Penguin, Ringwood, 1970; A. Curthoys, *Race and Ethnicity: A Study of the Response of British Colonists to Aborigines, Chinese and Non-British Europeans in New South Wales, 1856-1881*, unpublished PhD thesis, Macquarie University, 1973; C. A. Price, *The Great White Walls are Built*, Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1974; R. Evans, K. Saunders and K. Cronin, *Exclusion Exploitation Extermination: Race Relations in Colonial Queensland*, Australian and New Zealand Book Company, Sydney, 1975; A. Curthoys and A. Markus, *Who are our Enemies? Racism and the Working Class in Australia*, Hale and Iremonger, Neutral Bay, 1978; A. Markus, *Fear and Hatred: Purifying Australia and California 1850-1901*, Hale and Iremonger, Sydney, 1979; A. Markus, ‘Explaining the treatment of non-European immigrants in nineteenth century Australia’, *Labour History*, no. 48, 1985. For Burgmann’s critique, see V. Burgmann, *Revolutionaries and Racists: Australian Socialism and the Problem of Racism, 1887-1917*, unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Australian National University, 1980; ‘Racism, Socialism, and the Labour Movement, 1887-1917’, *Labour History*, no. 47, 1984; ‘Writing Racism Out of History’, *Arena*, no. 67, 1984; ‘Who our enemies are: Andrew Markus and the baloney view of Australian Racism’, *Labour History*, no. 49, 1985; *In Our Time’ Socialism and the Rise of Labor, 1885-1905*, George Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1985.

attribution of blame for racist immigration restrictions to a working class that had neither the industrial nor political power to secure such legislation from a reluctant ruling class. However, Burgmann did not successfully integrate her analysis of ruling class racism with an equivalent acknowledgement of the wide range of responses that the labour movement might have to such employer strategies. Although she examined the struggle towards anti-racist politics within early Australian socialist organisations, in Burgmann's formulation the struggle for political consciousness and international solidarity was principally an ideological question that, for the most part, sat above the class struggle where racist ideas mixed with workers' material existence and employer attempts to divide and rule. With this approach, the question of anti-racist activity within the labour movement was never satisfactorily addressed.

This study builds on the strengths of Burgmann's contributions, by focusing directly on the issue of ruling class racism and labour movement responses to it. Although historians have made repeated references to Protestant support for a war against 'the Hun', conservative newspaper diatribes about licentious Chinese opium dens, demonstrations of Empire loyalty in schools, and employer exploitation of 'foreign' workers, these examples have failed to penetrate a systematic explanation of Australian racism. Similarly, working class moves towards internationalism have been treated as little more than isolated examples, rather than problematic cases that do not fit the dominant historiographical interpretation. Although some historians have acknowledged the importance of the internationalist position propagated by the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) in the early years of the twentieth century,<sup>21</sup> students of Australian racism could be forgiven for thinking that the state's ability to assign the IWW to a virtual political oblivion simultaneously silenced the anti-racist project for several decades. Similarly, the anti-racist legacy of the Communist Party of Australia and the important debates and class conflicts that surrounded Australian Council of Trade Unions' affiliation to the Pan-Pacific Trade Union Movement have not been attributed any enduring significance in labour movement debates about racism.<sup>22</sup> It

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<sup>21</sup> See V. Burgmann, *Revolutionary Industrial Unionism: The Industrial Workers of the World in Australia*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 1995, pp. 79-91; Ian Turner, *Sydney's Burning*, Alpha, Sydney, 1969.

<sup>22</sup> See F. Farrell's 'The Pan-Pacific trade union movement and Australian labour, 1921-1932', *Historical Studies*, vol. 17, no. 69, 1977 and *International Socialism and Australian Labour*, Hale and Iremonger, Sydney, 1981.

will be argued here that these movements towards international solidarity were public manifestations of a wider issue that members of the Australian labour movement faced repeatedly – how to build industrial solidarity and strength in order to secure gains from the employing class. In that struggle, the question of racism was raised on a daily basis.

While workers have often supported campaigns against migrant labour, their material living and working conditions also establish a potential basis for unity. As Marx and Engels argued, the capitalist class ‘creates its own gravedigger’ – a mass class of free wage labourers – and so must work assiduously to avoid its own revolutionary demise by, among other things, producing ideas that help to entrench its pre-eminent position.<sup>23</sup> Prevailing ideas which in effect divide the working class are enormously important in maintaining that position. In Australia, business, political, church, educational and media leaders drew upon a specific array of weapons to wage this ideological battle and one of the most prominent of these was the RSL, usefully promoting, as it did, an ideology of racial division and class collaboration among conservative, working class returned soldiers. What effect did this propaganda have on conservative workers and their associates in the wider working class? These relationships are yet to be plotted, as an outline of the relevant literature will demonstrate.

Given the historiographical emphasis on working class support for immigration restriction, it might be assumed that RSL racism was not at odds with labour movement principles. On the contrary, this examination of the conservative political agenda behind the RSL’s commitment to the White Australia policy demonstrates that RSL racism was deliberately employed to exacerbate a perennial problem within the labour movement – the tactical question of how best to defend employment levels, wages and conditions. On occasion, sections of the labour movement vacillated between a strategy based on Australian nationalism and racial exclusion, on the one hand, and solidarity and internationalism on the other. Against the arguments of some on the Left of the labour movement that racism fundamentally contradicted the arguably more crucial imperative towards industrial solidarity, RSL activists consistently opposed any moves towards

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<sup>23</sup> K. Marx and F. Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, Foreign Languages Press, Peking, 1970, p. 46; *The German Ideology*, International Publishers, New York, 1972, pp. 64-68.

industrial unity across perceived racial boundaries, arguing that the only way to defend working class living standards was by means of non-British immigration restriction. In short, these tensions and debates suggest that racism within the Australian labour movement has a far more complex history than has hitherto been acknowledged.

In order to re-open the case for ruling class ‘culpability’, I examine the activities of the RSL at a local level. Few other organisations could claim a similar level of political influence in interwar society. While significant studies have examined its role in the heightened political periods of the immediate post-World War One years, the repatriation process, the Depression era and the Cold War witch-hunts of the 1950s,<sup>24</sup> much less attention has been focussed on the day-to-day proselytising of the RSL and the possible effects of this conservative influence within Australian communities. These two issues are examined here through a focus on the activities of ordinary people in two local sub-branches and the ways in which RSL members were able to influence the debates on racism that took place in their respective localities. Specifically, I consider attempts by RSL stalwarts to spread ideas of racial division within the labour movement and the wider working class. While an exact measure of the RSL’s ability to influence labour movement responses to migrant workers is probably not possible, an examination of the interactions and altercations between organised employers, workers, migrants and returned soldiers will highlight the alliances and strategies that were employed by the conservatives in attempts to win workers’ allegiance to nationalist outcomes.

This study employs case studies of Kalgoorlie and Broken Hill to examine the dynamics of racism at close quarters. Both towns hosted small but significant southern

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<sup>24</sup> See K. Amos, *The New Guard Movement 1931-1935*, Melbourne University Press, Clayton, 1976; M. Cathcart, *Defending the National Tuckshop: Australia’s Secret Army Intrigue of 1931*, McPhee Gribble, Fitzroy, 1988; R. Evans, *The Red Flag Riots: A Study of Intolerance*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1988; H. McQueen, ‘Shoot the Bolshevik! Hang the Profiteer! Reconstructing Australian Capitalism 1918-21’ in E. L. Wheelwright and K. Buckley (eds), *Essays in the Political Economy of Australian Capitalism*, vol. 2, Australia and New Zealand Book Co., Brookvale, 1978; A. Moore, *The Right Road? A History of Right-wing Politics in Australia*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1995 and *The Secret Army and the Premier*, New South Wales University Press, Kensington, 1989; J. Murray, ‘The Kalgoorlie Woodline Strikes 1919-1920: A Study of Conflict Within the Working Class’, *Studies in Western Australian History*, vol. 5, December 1982; P. Sekules and J. Rees, *Lest We Forget: The History of the Returned Services League 1916-1986*, Rigby, Dee Why West, 1986; B. Oliver, *War and Peace in Western Australia: The Social and Political Impact of the Great War 1914-1926*, University of Western Australia Press, Nedlands, 1995 and ‘Disputes, Diggers and Disillusionment: Social and Industrial Unrest in Perth and Kalgoorlie 1918-24’, *Studies in Western Australian History*, vol. 11, June 1990; L. J. Louis, ‘The RSL and the Cold War 1946-50’, *Labour History*, no. 74, 1998.

European populations during the interwar years, some of whom had been long-term residents and others who were more recent arrivals.<sup>25</sup> Both towns were dominated by the mining industry and while geographically isolated, each played a prominent part in the politics of their respective States. This was due in part to the attention they received from Labor and Communist-run newspapers which spread the word about industrial disputes, requested solidarity from other workers and passed on news about employment prospects. Both towns were viewed with trepidation by conservative forces in the capital cities, and on several occasions large contingents of ‘special’ constables were sent from Sydney and Perth to appease the fears of governments and mine managers. However, the disparities between these two towns are as decisive as their similarities. During the Depression, their economies diverged. While job shortages dealt a savage blow to the Broken Hill workforce, in Kalgoorlie the gold mining industry boomed. While unemployment was no stranger to the Kalgoorlie miners, the Depression was felt much more severely in Broken Hill.<sup>26</sup> However, until a successful strike in 1935, Kalgoorlie unionists never numbered much more than fifty per cent of the mining workforce and racial scapegoating of southern European miners was a common occurrence. In Broken Hill, racial divisions that arose were dealt with politically, with union leaders and their newspaper, the *Barrier Daily Truth*, delivering trenchant polemics on the need for internationalism. The Broken Hill unions did decide on a policy of exclusion to deal with the Depression, but it was an exclusion based on locality, rather than nationality. Locals, defined as resident for five years or more, were able to get employment whereas outsiders, born in Australia or elsewhere, were sent elsewhere to look for jobs. Conversely, in Kalgoorlie, racial tensions boiled over into two nights of horrific rioting against the homes and businesses of southern Europeans.

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<sup>25</sup> An accurate assessment of the number of southern Europeans in Kalgoorlie and Broken Hill is difficult to reach. A 1914 Royal Commission into the mining industry in Broken Hill estimated that 7 per cent of the workforce were ‘foreign’ [see Appendix D] while Price stated that southern Europeans never numbered more than 1-2 per cent of the town’s population. This ambiguity is mostly a product of high labour mobility. Price estimated that from 1892 to 1921, between one third and one half of the southern European workforce entered or left Broken Hill, a figure that only increased during strikes or economic downturns. Bertola cited census figures for Kalgoorlie and Boulder which suggested that, between 1921 and 1933, the percentage of southern European males as part of the overall male population increased from 2.47 per cent to 6.31 per cent. He also cited Mines Department of Western Australia figures which suggested that the southern European presence in the underground workforce was around 20 per cent, but noted that these figures included Australian-born ‘foreigners’. P. Bertola, ‘Tributers and Gold Mining in Boulder, 1918-1934’, *Labour History*, no. 65, 1993, p. 69.

<sup>26</sup> Bolton pointed out that it had not been necessary to set up an unemployment relief committee in Kalgoorlie during the Depression. G. C. Bolton, ‘Unemployment and Politics in Western Australia’, *Labour History*, no. 17, 1969, p. 94.

Even here, however, there were indications that racism could, and would, be challenged in the process of class struggle. These case studies demonstrate that racism within the working class has a fluidity not well portrayed in previous analyses. Certainly, they challenge the perception of racism as an almost preordained response from a local Australian working class threatened by migrant competition for jobs.

These case studies also provide examples of the complicated ways in which racism refracts through working class lives and show that, while racism might be one of the most dominant ideologies in society, that dominance is never absolute. While any study that focuses on the ideas held in people's heads must search for ideological tendencies and group identities, it is essential that these manifestations are examined in a way that takes account of the relationship between ideas and their social, political and economic context. As historians Peter Alexander and Rick Halpern argue in the introduction to a collection of essays on the nexus between race and class, working-class identities may well be 'constructed', but 'they are not assembled with complete freedom from a limitless range of possibilities'.<sup>27</sup> Capitalist ideology often makes divisions between workers of different nationalities seem 'natural' and, while those divisions are frequently defended by workers, it should not be forgotten that working class people share common interests and experiences regardless of their location. At times of social crisis, ideas which challenge otherwise dominant racist assumptions can emerge and sometimes compete for supremacy. It is possible then to imagine points at which the politics of exclusion might contradict the need for solidarity within the working class. It is these limits to racist ideology, part and parcel of the material conditions within which working class people operate, that have not been satisfactorily acknowledged by Australian historians. For this reason, this study focuses on specific crises in 'race relations' as a window into the emergence of ideas that challenge the otherwise dominant racist hegemony. Moreover, by placing these crises in context, it is also possible to observe more long-standing trends that promoted social and industrial conflict or solidarity.

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<sup>27</sup> P. Alexander and R. Halpern (eds), *Racialising Class, Classifying Race: Labour and Difference in Britain, the USA and Africa*, Macmillan, London, 2000, p. ix.

It is the intention of this study to refute the approach of previous historians who have thought it possible to understand the dynamics of racism by examining only the working class. No class exists in isolation.<sup>28</sup> As numerous scholars have shown, an equally important part of any historical analysis must be the role played by the other ‘contending’ class, the employing class, whose material interest lies in using a variety of strategies to divide and rule its labour force.<sup>29</sup> Racism must be included as one of those strategies. In Kalgoorlie and Broken Hill, I argue that mine managers played a crucial role in promoting racial divisions. In the former, they encouraged competition within the labour market by means of racist hiring practices that advocated migrant labour for certain types of work. In Broken Hill, the mine managers undertook an active campaign to weaken signs of internationalism within the local labour movement, seeing any indication of unity as a threat to their ability to subdue militancy. In short, in both towns mine managers encouraged the arrival of ‘cheap labour’ and fanned racist sentiment in order to ensure that such labour remained cheap. To this end, they fostered alliances within the leadership of the local sub-branches of the RSL. Because the RSL was a cross-class organisation dominated by conservative sections of society, it occupied an important strategic position for the dissemination of racist ideas among working class people. However, in both towns there is evidence that this propaganda met with a very mixed response when RSL members attempted to galvanise workers around conservative and nationalistic platforms. Importantly for the historiography of racism, these case studies throw a good deal of light on the question of working class responses to racism and, just as importantly, the possibilities of anti-racism. They show the weakness of arguments which portray the contact experience engendered by immigration as simply one of suspicion and ghettoisation. They also illustrate how a limited focus on competition for jobs can blind us to the very reason why workers formed unions in the first place – to limit the degree to which employers could exploit their need for paid work by forcing them to compete with each other.

This thesis has seven chapters. The first chapter is an overview of the existing historiography regarding racism in Australian society which identifies key questions

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<sup>28</sup> Marx and Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, p. 31.

<sup>29</sup> See, for example, E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, Penguin, Ringwood, 1968, pp. 469-81; R. Connell and T. Irving, *Class Structure in Australian History*, Longman Cheshire, Melbourne, 1980, p. 122, 207.

that emerge from the prevailing accounts. It also surveys the existing literature on the RSL and suggests that some areas of RSL practice shed light on the dissemination of racial ideology in local communities. The second chapter outlines the theory and methodology employed in this study and the sources that have been examined. Chapter Three outlines the political, economic, industrial and social role of the RSL, from its volatile inception in 1916 to its more 'settled' character in the 1930s. Chapter Four is the first of two background chapters. In order to present developments in Kalgoorlie between the wars, it is first necessary to outline the context in which they occurred. This chapter describes the most influential groups in Kalgoorlie industrial relations and their influence in the area of race relations. Chapter Five is a case study of Kalgoorlie. It provides detailed accounts of the 1916, 1919 and 1934 race riots, events that provide a significant window into race relations in the town. In Chapter Six, the focus shifts to Broken Hill and the groups that had industrial influence there. Unlike Kalgoorlie, Broken Hill experienced no major outbursts of racial violence but the heated debates regarding immigration restriction and internationalism that took place in the 1920s were extremely significant and their implications are examined in Chapter Seven. In the conclusion to this study, I discuss key challenges to the existing historiography raised by the evidence outlined in this thesis. Does the competition for jobs only engender racist responses from host workers? Will the proximity of workers from different countries only encourage feelings of contempt? What role do employers play in the promotion of racist ideology? Did they have an active hand in weakening the industrial organisation of their workforces, using racism as a divisive tool?

In summary, this thesis supports and extends Verity Burgmann's contention that racism was an ideology manipulated and employed by sections of the Australian bourgeoisie for its own political and economic interests. While racist ideology was widely accepted and often actively supported by the labour movement, there were also significant instances when organised workers were forced to face the limitations of these ideas because they contradicted the need for solidarity. Employing a local focus, the case studies highlight the tensions that existed around the question of southern European immigration and illustrate the need for a class analysis to explain race relations. In short, employers had a lot to gain from racial division and the RSL provided them with an important resource. Its constant harping about the presence of

southern Europeans on the mines was directed as much at weakening labour unity as it was at sustaining the ideology of a White Australia.

Participant-observer historians, such as Burgmann and McQueen, demonstrated a commitment to producing texts intended as tools for a movement. While the times have certainly changed since ‘New Left’<sup>30</sup> historians issued their manifestos for a historical re-assessment of the dynamics of racism, it is no less true that an understanding of the social relations and the material struggles which operate to attack racism's hegemony is a necessary precondition for the consignment of racism to the appropriate dustbin of history. It is in the same light that this thesis has been written.

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<sup>30</sup> For a discussion of debates between ‘Old Left’ and ‘New Left’ historians, see T. Irving (ed), ‘Labour History, crisis and the public sphere’, *Challenges to Labour History*, University of New South Wales Press, Sydney, 1994, pp. 1-20.