

CHAPTER FOUR

Kalgoolie in Context

*Rather rowdy,
Dingy, cloudy,
Dusty, dirty, dim and dowdy,
Thirsty throats to mock.
Can't mistake her,
Good drought slaker,
Six pubs to the bloomin' acre,
That's the Boulder Block.*

Casey & Mayman, *The Mile that Midas Touched*

Introduction

Australia's Western Third by Frank Crowley and Geoffrey Bolton's *A Fine Country to Starve In* are prominent works on Western Australia's history and include large sections on the interwar period.¹ Until relatively recently, their view that Western Australian society was characterised by conservatism was widely accepted. From 1990 onwards, however, studies which challenge that thesis have been growing in number; these accounts instead portray interwar Western Australian society as one of 'both consensus and conflict'.² Historians such as Jenny Gregory and Bobbie Oliver have argued that the conservative element of 'Australia's western third' has been grossly exaggerated.³ Consequently, a great deal of invaluable work has been done to bring into sharper relief the myriad oppositional currents that developed in the interwar period.

¹ F. Crowley, *Australia's Western Third*, Macmillan, London, 1960; G. Bolton, *A Fine Country to Starve In*, University of Western Australia Press, Churchlands, 1994.

² J. Gregory, 'Western Australia Between the Wars: The Consensus Myth', *Studies in Western Australian History*, vol. 11, June 1990, p. 1.

Published in 1960, Frank Crowley's work painted Western Australia in the classic mould of a frontier society gradually taking on the trappings of 'civilised' society.⁴ In his view:

Pastoralist and pearler, farmer and miner, employer and factory hand, politician and churchman – all had every right to experience an overwhelming feeling of achievement and optimism as the State entered into the third decade of its history in the twentieth century.⁵

Crowley portrayed the Western Australian working class as wholly supportive of social and industrial changes. His view was that successive governments bestowed benign legislation on the working class for its own good. Ignoring the fierce, five-week lumpers' strike of 1899 that provided the political context for State intervention into industrial relations and which almost resulted in the picket line homicide of the Acting Premier, Crowley portrayed the rushed introduction of arbitration thus:

This method of governing labour relations was one of the great social gains of the boom years, and it is significant that it was the gift of a non-Labour Government to a trade-union movement which had not had a hard struggle either for official recognition or for legislative controls to curb the excesses of private enterprise.⁶

Geoffrey Bolton made similar attempts to portray Western Australian society as characterised by seamless acquiescence. Yet, even his own accounts of unemployed protests, spurred on, as Bolton would have it, by Communist troublemakers and eastern states' radicals, showed that the unemployed were fighting against a State Government ruthlessly prepared to bludgeon protesters in order to quell criticism. Ludicrously, Bolton claimed that baton usage against demonstrators was evidence of the police's intention to

³ 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.

⁴ For a critique of the work of Crowley and others, see G. C. Bolton, 'Western Australia Reflects on its Past' in C. T. Stannage (ed), *A New History of Western Australia*, University of Western Australia Press, Nedlands, 1981, pp. 676-691.

⁵ Crowley, *Australia's Western Third*, p. 198.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 142.

‘incapacitate with a minimum of harmful violence’.⁷ In the introduction to a new edition of his book released some twenty years after its first publication, Bolton stood by many of his initial assertions. Western Australia was, he argued, a convincing example of Gramsci’s concept of hegemony: ‘the techniques by which the ruling classes maintain a hold over public opinion by presenting a mythology or upholding a tradition which the majority of people can be brought to accept and even internalise as their own’.⁸ While it does seem that the Western Australian ruling class was particularly successful in promoting a sense of accord, Gramsci did not suggest that lack of overt struggle indicated a widespread acceptance of ruling class ideas and aspirations. In other words, hegemony could be powerful, but never absolute.

Oliver has argued that Western Australia was no more conservative than other parts of Australia and that historians such as Crowley, Bolton and the stalwarts of the Western Australian Historical Society have painted a false picture of the class struggle in the West.⁹ However, while the ‘new histories’ are certainly more compelling than those supporting the ‘consensus thesis’, it might be argued that the pendulum has swung a little too far in the opposite direction. It might now be pertinent to question whether conservatives in Western Australia were perhaps *more* successful in overcoming challenges from below than were their counterparts in other States. It is surely not mere flippancy to suggest that even the longevity of the consensus thesis speaks, a little, for itself and that it might now be time to argue over questions of dialectics and degree. While the respective roles of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), the Communist Party of Australia (CPA) and the Labor Left are an essential component of any convincing explanation, an assessment of their relative strength and influence against that of their conservative opponents is also required to understand the degree to which class struggle ruffled Australia’s ‘western third’.

The history of the twin cities of Kalgoorlie and Boulder is integrally linked to the trends evident in Western Australian history more generally. Therefore, any study of racism

⁷ Bolton, *A Fine Country to Starve In*, p. 156.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. xviii.

in the area must account for the wider political and ideological background that has influenced local events. Developments on the goldfields provide a valuable opportunity to focus on racism in a local context, Kalgoorlie and Boulder having been the site of three separate instances of race rioting – in 1916, 1919 and 1934. In order to understand how such a series of riots might eventuate, the economic, political, industrial and social context of the locality will be described as a foundation upon which to mount the case study material that follows in Chapter Five. To this end, this chapter will outline the activities of four groups that had a major influence on race relations on the ‘Golden Mile’ – the Chamber of Mines, the predominant employer organisation; the Australian Workers’ Union (AWU), the largest union of goldfields workers and its political counterpart, the Australian Labor Party (ALP); the local organisation of the Communist Party of Australia; and the local sub-branch of the RSL. While not the only groups that might be considered, these four were selected on the basis that they had a significant influence on the *industrial* life of the town. This necessary concentration does mean, however, that the activities of local churches and schools, while also important in race relations, are mentioned only in a peripheral manner.

Capital meets labour

Kalgoorlie, and nearby Boulder, mushroomed into one of the most renowned goldmining areas in the world during the 1890s. Like any town built in the middle of a desert, migration formed a vital part of its history. Thousands of people travelled massive distances from other parts of Australia and, indeed, the globe to reach the ‘Golden Mile’. Investment capital, primarily from Britain, was raised in its millions and speculative ventures abounded.¹⁰ However, the ‘Champagne Charlies’, as Casey and Mayman called them, were soon overtaken by more consolidated forms of capital and by approximately 1910,

⁹ Oliver, *War and Peace*, pp. 16-7.

¹⁰ See R. T. Appleyard and M. Davies, ‘Financiers of Western Australia’s Goldfields’ in R. T. Appleyard and C. B. Schedvin (eds), *Australian Financiers: Biographical Essays*, Macmillan, South Melbourne, 1988, p. 163.

Kalgoorlie had become a predominantly ‘wages town’.¹¹ Conditions on the mines and in surrounding areas were extremely unhealthy; deadly accidents and diseases were commonplace. The local cemetery, established in Kalgoorlie in 1894, provides a graphic illustration of this – five years after its opening, it contained 1,200 graves.¹²

Many of the earliest miners to arrive in Kalgoorlie came from Victoria and brought with them strong convictions about the rights of the alluvial miner. It was these traditions that helped to spark ‘miners’ rights’ disputes on the Golden Mile and galvanised moves toward trade unionism in the mid-1890s.¹³ In 1896, Kalgoorlie miners joined with ‘diggers’ from other fields to form the Amalgamated Miners’ Association, using rules adopted from its Broken Hill counterpart. Approximately thirty unions were formed on the goldfields by 1899.¹⁴ As in other industries, the formation of mining trade unions led to closer organisation of mining employers. It was also in the mid 1890s that mine managers formed the local Chamber of Mines, which became the dominant employer voice on the goldfields.¹⁵ In 1917, the Kalgoorlie miners became part of the Mining Section of the Western Australian branch of the Australian Workers’ Union, an arrangement that would have secretly pleased the Chamber of Mines.¹⁶ To them, a union that openly supported arbitration, non-militancy, parliamentary reform and, importantly, open hostility towards the IWW syndicalism that was winning a significant number of adherents at the time, was a welcome development towards peaceful industrial relations. In Boylson’s view, the Kalgoorlie mines’ subsequent industrial record was ‘impressive’ because open conflict was rare. As he continued:

¹¹ G. Casey and T. Mayman, *The Mile that Midas Touched*, Rigby, Adelaide, 1964, pp. 94, 135.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 51.

¹³ See M. Webb, ‘John Forrest and the Western Australian Goldrushes’, *Early Days*, vol. 10, no. 5, 1993, pp. 483-6; I. H. Vanden Driesen, ‘The Evolution of the Trade Union Movement in Western Australia’ in C. T. Stannage (ed), *A New History of Western Australia*, University of Western Australia Press, Nedlands, 1981, p. 368.

¹⁴ L. B. McIntyre, *Trade Unionism and Industrial Conciliation and Arbitration – W.A., 1900-1914*, unpublished MA thesis, University of Western Australia, 1972, p. 25.

¹⁵ See A. Porter, ‘Richard Hamilton and the East Coolgardie Gold Mining Industry 1896-1927’, *Studies in Western Australian History*, vol. 5, December 1982, p. 1.

While this does not necessarily mean an absence of other forms of industrial unrest, it does indicate that good workable labour-management relations [were] established over the years. The view is supported by representatives of both parties. When compared with the industrial record of other Australian mining and metal mining industries, the absence of persistent open conflict seems more than mere coincidence.¹⁷

As Chapter Five will illustrate, Boylson's bright depiction of industrial relations in Kalgoorlie dramatically understated the tensions evident within the mining industry in the interwar period. Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that the town's industrial history was deeply affected by developments in other parts of the state, with the conservative nature of labour movement organisation in Western Australia, in particular, acting as a wet blanket on militancy.

The Western Australian 'wet blanket'

For many of the years under consideration in this study, Western Australia had a Labor government in the Lower House.¹⁸ Frank Crowley reiterated the widely-held view that being unable to have a majority in the Legislative Council did not unduly bother Labor-controlled Assemblies.¹⁹ Often legislation that had been drafted as pragmatic attempts to appease Labor's more radical supporters could be safely sent to the Upper House without the slightest risk of being passed. Pervan stated that the constant rejection of Government bills by the Legislative Council 'was not entirely unwelcome' and that Labor politicians preferred the Council to take the blame if popular legislation failed to pass through both Houses. Despite vociferous criticism from Labor supporters of the restrictive role played by

¹⁶ Casey and Mayman, *The Mile that Midas Touched*, p. 97; M. Hearn and H. Knowles, *One Big Union: A History of the Australian Workers Union 1886-1994*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 1996, p. 157.

¹⁷ B. J. Boylson, *Industrial Relations in the Western Australian Gold Mining Industry*, unpublished B.Ec (Hons) thesis, University of Western Australia, 1967, p. iii.

¹⁸ The Scaddan ministry held power from 1911 to 1916. With Phillip Collier as Premier, Labor was in office from 1924 to 1930 and from 1933 to 1947.

¹⁹ A prohibitive property qualification thwarted the aspirations of many Labor politicians to enter these lofty ranks. Crowley, *Australia's Western Third*, p. 230.

the Council, as far as the Labor government was concerned, ‘the action taken with regard to the Legislative Council was at all times cautious and moderate’.²⁰

The industrial and political wings of the labour movement were combined into the Australian Labor Federation (ALF). At the 1902 Congress of the Political Labor Party, it was resolved that ‘every union in each electoral division [would become] a branch of the Party’.²¹ This meant that trade union branches became branches of the ALF and a worker who took out membership of a trade union automatically became a member of the Political Labor Party as well. Headed by a General Council, the ALF was set up with a State Executive and ten District Councils of union affiliates, of which the goldfields organisation was one of the most influential. While McIntyre argued that unity between political and industrial demands guaranteed that the Party remained in union hands, others, like Pervan, were certain that the AWU, the ALF’s largest affiliate, was always dominated by concern for the electoral fortunes of the Labor Party and was industrially hamstrung as a result.²² Pervan and Mitchell argued that Labor in Western Australia was conservative from the outset and was determined to promote ‘community concerns’ above labour movement ‘sectionalism’. As compelling evidence of this trend, they recounted the actions of Labor parliamentarians in 1901, who condemned the wage demands of striking railway employees, claims that even the Minister for Railways had conceded were fair.²³

Although political nepotism was not a uniquely Western Australian phenomenon, the relationship between the political and industrial wings of the Western Australian labour movement was uncommonly close. Two thirds of the eighteen Cabinet ministers who held office in Labor Governments between the Depression and the aftermath of the Second

²⁰ R. F. Pervan, *The Western Australian Labor Movement, 1933-47*, unpublished MA thesis, University of Western Australia, 1966, pp. 105-7 and ‘Leadership Influence on the Nature of the Political Party: The Case of the W.A. Branch of the A.L.P. in the ‘Thirties’’, *Labour History*, no. 19, 1970.

²¹ McIntyre, *Trade Unionism and Industrial Conciliation and Arbitration*, p. 79.

²² Pervan, *Western Australian Labor Movement*, p. 2.

²³ R. Pervan and D. Mitchell, ‘The Changing Nature of the Australian Labor Party’ in R. Pervan and C. Sharman (eds), *Essays on Western Australian Politics*, University of Western Australia Press, Nedlands, 1979, p. 130.

World War maintained formal links with the AWU.²⁴ At the 1935 Labor Party General Council meeting, this single union commanded more than one fifth of the total number of votes.²⁵ Pervan calculated that:

[i]n the period between the 1932 and 1935 General Councils, AWU membership almost trebled, while overall union membership rose only by 30%, that is, the union's voting strength rose from 37 votes out of a total of 389 at the 1932 conference to 100 votes out of 490 at the 1935 conference.²⁶

The road from union hierarchy to political office was exceptionally well-trodden in Western Australia, especially by ex-AWU officials. John Curtin, who progressed from a job as an AWU official in Victoria to the editorship of the *Westralian Worker*, was perhaps the most prominent example of this phenomenon. His work with the union movement eventually led to a place on the ALP State Executive²⁷ and, in due course, to the Prime Ministership.²⁸

The *Westralian Worker* was the principal newspaper of the Western Australian labour movement. It first hit the streets in 1900 and was financed and controlled by the AWU. More often than not, the *Westralian Worker* was a forthright advocate of the White Australia policy and, when war broke out, the paper came down firmly on the side of Australia's involvement, vehemently promoting conscription and anti-German hysteria. When the Prime Minister, W. M. Hughes, made an appeal for 50,000 volunteers for the war effort, its Editor proudly published the Prime Minister's 'Call to Arms'.²⁹ However, the executive of the *Westralian Worker* was predominantly anti-conscription – they moved to sack the pro-conscriptionist editor, J. Hilton, and replace him with a like-minded opponent of conscription, namely John Curtin. Curtin took up the role in early 1917, further cementing a personal rightward political shift that had begun with his appointment to the

²⁴ Pervan, *Western Australian Labor Movement*, p. 13.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

²⁷ The ALF was renamed the ALP in 1919.

²⁸ Hearn and Knowles, *One Big Union*, p. 141. See also D. Day, *John Curtin: a life*, HarperCollins, Pymble, 2000, pp. 212-252.

²⁹ *Westralian Worker*, 24 December 1915. See also L. F. Fitzhardinge, *The Little Digger 1914-1952: A Political Biography of William Morris Hughes*, vol. 2, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1979, p. 59.

secretaryship of the Timber Workers' Union in 1911. Although nowhere near as bigoted as his predecessor, Curtin, the former internationalist, promoted the racist justification for anti-conscription, claiming that conscription would herald the importation of cheap, foreign labour and jeopardise Australia's defence interests.³⁰ A few years after Curtin's departure to Canberra, his replacement described the White Australia policy as an expression of a 'noble national ideal'.³¹ Certainly, Australian nationalists were not challenged by Curtin's presence in Western Australia. On the eve of Anzac Day in 1925, Curtin published an editorial that would not have seemed out of place in a returned soldier magazine. He wrote:

Tomorrow we will commemorate that day in 1915 on which our soldier representatives blazoned forth the fact that another nation had arrived at the stage when it was prepared to take a militant part in the affairs of nations ... reverential pride must predominate ... it is a fact that the manhood of this island continent generously responded and played their parts nobly, risking everything for what they considered was duty's call.³²

Many non-British migrants to Western Australia suffered the full brunt of state-regulated racism during World War One. Oliver commented on two studies that revealed a proportionally higher number of 'enemy subjects' interned in Western Australia, with particular mention made of the 'mass internment of Austrian Slavs from the goldfields'. She concluded that, in comparison to other State governments, the Western Australian Government had been 'particularly zealous' in the administration of its internment powers.³³ After the war, Western Australian governments on both sides of the political fence promoted immigration as essential for the State's development.³⁴ During the 1920s, a significant level of southern European immigration was permitted. However, as economic recession began to bite in 1927, Premier Collier lobbied the Federal Government for greater

³⁰ Day, *John Curtin: a life*, pp. 243-4.

³¹ *Westralian Worker*, 10 February 1933.

³² *Westralian Worker*, 24 April 1925.

³³ B. Oliver, "'All-British' or 'Anti-German'? A Portrait of a Western Australian Pressure Group during World War I", *Studies in Western Australian History*, vol. 7, April 1991, p. 30.

³⁴ D. Black, 'The Era of Labor Ascendancy 1924-1947' in C. T. Stannage (ed), *A New History of Western Australia*, University of Western Australia Press, Nedlands, 1981, pp. 410-11.

restrictions on immigration.³⁵ As unemployment rose, Labor in government was anxious to institute such measures as a placebo to deflect anger onto migrants for the problems caused by the economic contraction.³⁶ As an example of government scape-goating, more than three hundred unnaturalised Yugoslavs and Italians, many of whom were owed wages by bankrupt farmers, were refused welfare by the State in 1931. When some local and overseas-born workers pledged to fight together for improved rations at a mass meeting, their protests were met with harsh action by mounted police who ‘restored order’.³⁷

With such official endorsement of racism from politicians and labour movement leaders, it is not hard to imagine why some workers believed that migrants *per se* were the source of their problems. In Kalgoorlie, the ‘official’ racism of both Labor and conservative politicians was reflected in frequent claims that southern Europeans were disrespectful to women, scabbed on the job, caused mine accidents, lived in filthy conditions and sent all their earnings out of the country. However, at this grassroots level, the logic of racist ideology faced a number of contradictions. On the one hand, the claims of labour movement officials that migrants took jobs might have seemed commonsensical to many workers in the face of relentless job competition. On the other hand, both Britisher and southern European workers were obliged to congregate in workplaces and union meetings, simultaneously facing daily struggles against their employers. Such circumstances made possible the realisation that migrants were a substantial part of the mining workforce and that organising them into a union was essential for the maintenance of industrial muscle.

‘Golden Mile’ Industrial Relations: the AWU, the CPA and the Chamber of Mines

The AWU, and particularly its Mining Division, was the most influential trade union on the goldfields. In Western Australia, the union was organised in a similar fashion

³⁵ See Collier letters to Home and Territories Department, Correspondence File, ‘Alien Immigration to Western Australia’, NAA: A1/15, 1927/15940.

³⁶ Bolton, *A Fine Country to Starve In*, p. 59.

³⁷ *Workers’ Weekly*, 19 June 1931.

to its counterparts in other states; AWU officials cynically espoused the rhetoric but not the ideals of the 'One Big Union', in order to make their organisation simply big.³⁸ Arbitration and amalgamations were the preferred *modus operandi* by which the AWU gradually encompassed a large membership based primarily on rural industries, mining and railroads.³⁹ By the early 1920s, the union administered fourteen awards in Western Australia and further growth seemed inevitable.⁴⁰ Hearn and Knowles estimated that the union represented six thousand mine workers on the Western Australian goldfields in the mid-1930s.⁴¹ While this figure represented a significant level of union organisation, it must be set against the immense resurgence of gold mining during the 1930s and a sharp rise in the size of the workforce to 16,174 men by 1936.⁴² As Boylson explained:

the Eastern Goldfields District Council was less effective during the 'thirties than it had been. Vast numbers of workers were non-unionists, several groups of workers were unorganised and some unions, such as the Kalgoorlie Engine Drivers, had disaffiliated from the [P]arty. Part of the apathy stemmed from the overwhelming strength of the AWU which absolutely dominated the Council.⁴³

The principal industrial opponent of the AWU on the goldfields was the Chamber of Mines, an organisation that represented mine management and shareholders by promoting any policy that would increase mine profits.⁴⁴ In Kalgoorlie, the AWU leadership occupied a contradictory position between the Chamber of Mines and its own membership. Although it sought peaceful and bureaucratic negotiations with management, it also sought to build a union in an industry where management denied any concessions, using every possible means to reduce wages and conditions and to weaken trade unionism. The union had been unable to resist the Chamber of Mines' push towards greater employment competition on

³⁸ See, for example, 'Rise of the A.W.U.', speech to members by E. Grayndler, general secretary of the AWU, reprinted in *Westralian Worker*, 24 December 1915.

³⁹ See W. G. Spence, *History of the A.W.U.*, The Worker Trustees, Sydney, 1961 (first published 1911).

⁴⁰ Hearn and Knowles, *One Big Union*, p. 147.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 179.

⁴² B. J. Boylson, *Industrial Relations in the Western Australian Gold Mining Industry*, pp. 14-5.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp. 14-5.

⁴⁴ See R. Hartley, 'Bewick Moreing in Western Australian Gold Mining 1897-1904: Management Policies and Goldfields Responses', *Labour History*, no. 65, 1993.

the mines, and widespread blaming of migrants for lack of jobs and poor conditions either went unchallenged or became a convenient scapegoating exercise. In 1916, Broken Hill union official, George Kerr, visited the goldfields to raise money for the Broken Hill hours dispute. Kerr praised the local unionists but wrote that their officials were ‘a lot of rotters’.⁴⁵ He felt that they had ‘one eye on Parliament, both hands flapping a flag, and both feet on militant unionism’.⁴⁶ However, Kerr saved his greatest censure for a recent decision made by the goldfields miners not to work with enemy subjects, remarking on how much the employers must be enjoying the industrial division among the mine workforce and its effect on union strength.

Under pressure from investors to maintain massive dividends, the Chamber of Mines consistently ‘cried poor’ and resisted demands for wage increases and improvements to facilities. Little consideration was given to further investment in technology to improve yields and lengthen the life of the fields. However, after stinging criticism of industry management by two government inquiries in 1925 and 1927,⁴⁷ some mine managers implemented changes to improve productivity. The subsequent re-organisation of gold production incorporated the use of more efficient technology and a greater concentration of capital. In 1930, these efficiencies received practical encouragement from the Scullin Federal Government, with its agreement to pay a gold bounty of one pound per ounce in order to guarantee as much production as possible, as the gold was urgently required to meet overseas loan obligations. The rate of the bounty was halved in July 1931 and then suspended in September 1932, but it had been sufficient to revitalise the flagging industry. The price of gold doubled between 1930 and 1934 and production reached its peak in

⁴⁵ Kerr’s letter to a friend was published in *Barrier Daily Truth* and, as a result, came to the attention of the goldfields labour movement.

⁴⁶ *Kalgoorlie Miner*, 11 March 1916.

⁴⁷ Report of the Royal Commission on the Mining Industry, Minutes and Votes and Proceedings of the Parliament, vol. 1, paper 3, 1925; Western Australian Development and Migration Commission, *Interim Report Relating to the Gold Mining Industry of W.A.*, Government Printer, Melbourne, 1927.

1939.⁴⁸ While the rest of Australia was deeply mired in economic depression, the Kalgoorlie mines boomed.

The most divisive management tactic introduced on the mines was tributing, which saw some miners performing waged labour on award rates, others were paid contract rates, and others became tributers who sub-leased sections of the mine and paid the mine management a percentage of all ore extracted. During World War One, tribute mining was instituted on the goldfields as costs rose and labour shortages became acute. Miners competed to lease the most profitable sections of mines, resulting in a deeply divisive employment relationship. Payment rates were altered arbitrarily and daily hire became endemic.⁴⁹ Tribute miners felt that the mine managements, because they controlled the treatment of ore and the price that was charged for this service, were not paying the tributers a fair return for their labour. In response, the companies pursued a 'freedom of contract' line, arguing that local unemployment rates meant that tributers should accept the conditions on offer as there were plenty of others waiting for a similar chance.⁵⁰ Despite management's rudimentary endeavours to restructure labour relations, the 1920s have not been viewed as a propitious time for mining on the 'Golden Mile'. One company history claimed that a 'black depression hung over the mines' in this period.⁵¹ However, during the early 1930s, a sharp rise in the gold price and new gold treatment techniques encouraged management to phase out tribute mining.⁵² While mining profits soared, this era was not described favourably by miners. Much of the relevant oral history records high unemployment, low wages, few facilities and an extremely onerous, dangerous working

⁴⁸ For example, the Perseverance mine dividend rose to 25 per cent in 1936 and then rose further to 40 per cent. The North Kalgurli mine paid a dividend of 62.5 per cent in 1935, 100 per cent in 1937. G. Blainey, *The Golden Mile*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, 1993, pp. 134-139. The 'Kalgurli' spelling derives from a different English spelling of an Aboriginal name for a wild pear that grew in the region.

⁴⁹ P. Bertola, 'Tributers and Gold Mining in Boulder, 1918-1934', *Labour History*, no. 65, 1993.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

⁵¹ *Fifty Historical Years 1910-1960*, Lake View and Star, Limited, London, 1960, p. 4.

⁵² Bertola pointed out that by 1930 tributers on the two largest leases in Boulder produced 40% of the gold mined on the entire East Coolgardie Gold Field. P. Bertola, 'Tributers and Gold Mining', p. 54. Layman noted that one tributer float in the 1911 Eight Hour Day procession proclaimed contract miners as the 'Salvation of the Goldfields'. L. Layman, 'Labour's Annual Holiday: Eastern Goldfields Eight Hours Demonstrations, 1900-1914', *Studies in Western Australian History*, vol. 10, April 1989, p. 99.

environment. In Kalgoorlie alone, with a population of 6,815, the 1933 male unemployment stood at 16.7 per cent while the female rate was 11.8 per cent.⁵³

From the earliest days, management had attempted to sow racial division within the goldfields workforce. For example, future American President, Herbert Hoover, the then trend-setting manager of the Bewick Moreing-owned Sons of Gwalia mine, situated north of Kalgoorlie, began to import Italian miners at the turn of the century and threatened the newly unionised workforce that many more Italians would come if new work arrangements were not accepted. Nash quoted Hoover thus: ‘We are introducing several Italians, who are in every way superior workers to the men formerly employed.’⁵⁴ Hoover’s determination to increase the efficiency of the Bewick Moreing workforce was not accompanied by mere idle threat. McCarty stated that he ‘sacked up to 30% of the workers in some mines’.⁵⁵ Colin Turnbull recalled the ‘divide and rule’ tactics of the mine managers and the local newspaper when Bewick Moreing controlled the Sons of Gwalia mine. He maintained that the Gwalia Post Office had a State record for overseas remittances and that these figures were published in the newspaper from time to time, serving to inflame ill-feeling between Britishers and the predominantly Italian workforce. He also recalled that management defended its decision to hire Italians ‘because Italians were the only ones prepared to do this sort of work, this underground work, which was very rough and rugged and pretty awful conditions’.⁵⁶ In 1909, Hoover published some lectures he had composed on the principles of sound mine management. These provide significant insights into the views he developed while working at the Sons of Gwalia mine and attest to his belief in the notion of a racial hierarchy. On the subject of labour hire, he argued that white labour was the most profitable, while ‘Negroes’ and Asians were useful for unskilled labour, as evidenced by

⁵³ P. Spearritt, ‘Depression Statistics’ in J. Mackinolty (ed.), *The Wasted Years? Australia's Great Depression*, George Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1981, p. 211.

⁵⁴ G. N. Nash, *The Life of Herbert Hoover, the Engineer, 1874-1914*, W. W. Norton & Co, New York, 1983, p. 72.

⁵⁵ J. W. McCarty, ‘British Investment in Western Australian Gold Mining, 1894-1914’, *University Studies in History*, vol. 4, no. 1, 1961-2, p. 21.

⁵⁶ Interview with *Colin Turnbull*, conducted by Michael Adams between December 1980 and May 1982. Transcript held in the J. S. Batty Library, Perth, reference no. OH406, pp. 304-5.

‘the breaking-in of savages of low average mentality, like the South African Kaffirs’.⁵⁷ However, non-white workers were unable to master complex machinery and required high levels of direct supervision. White workers, in contrast, were able to apply improved technology and were, hence, more profitable per ton extracted. His only qualification to this claim was the chilling observation that ‘in white-manned groups, the stopes are supported, while in the others no support is required’.⁵⁸

With such views prevalent among influential ‘opinion-makers’, it is hardly surprising that ideas of white superiority achieved a certain dominance in the thinking of many ordinary people. In Kalgoorlie, the most common slur on migrant miners in the period under review was the accusation that they routinely bribed the shift bosses to obtain work.⁵⁹ In 1934, when race rioting broke out, this pre-existing prejudice converged with the sharp contraction of the tributing system and the restructuring of employment relationships by the mine managers which had been taking place since 1931. While the AWU failed to take up the questions of racism and the alleged ‘slingbacks’, its inaction served the interests of the Chamber of Mines inasmuch as blaming foreigners shifted attention from the competitive labour situation in the mines, marginalising attention to this fundamental corruption of the employment contract. Indeed, the belief that foreigners were getting preference was indirectly fuelled by members of the Chamber of Mines. During World War One, the mine managers had continually complained about labour shortages, claiming that they were forced to employ foreigners because Britisher miners were unwilling to do the work. The *Westralian Worker* pointed out that Britishers would only refuse certain types of work if they were dangerous or unhealthy. Rhetorically, the paper asked, ‘do the managers wish to infer that they take advantage of the ignorance of the foreigner to get him to undertake what

⁵⁷ H. Hoover, *Principles of Mining*, McGraw-Hill, New York, 1909, p. 162.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 164. ‘Stopes’ result from the step-like excavation of ore from vertical or inclined veins. Supported stopes were those that were ‘timbered’ in order to offer workers minimal protection from falling rocks etc. However, as Asian and black workers were clearly expendable in Hoover’s view, they required no such protection.

⁵⁹ See, for example, C. Gamba, *The Italian Immigration to Western Australia*, unpublished MA thesis, University of Western Australia, 1949, pp. 28-32.

better informed and more experienced men refuse to do?’⁶⁰ Ignoring this point, the Chamber of Mines made specific reference to the undesirability of Britisher miners who would work only one shift and then fail to report for work the next morning. They also claimed that they could not be expected to employ workers who had been classed by the mine managers as ‘undesirables’. It was alleged that these men would not ‘do a fair day’s work’ or ‘work more than a shift or two in between drinking spells’. If this was the only type of Britisher labour available, argued the mine managers, ‘it is not surprising that foreigners who are both able and willing to undertake the necessary work should be engaged’.⁶¹ They made it abundantly clear that the foreign-born miner was an example that Britisher miners would do well to emulate. By selecting a labour force that they hoped would be hard-working and uninfected by trade unionism, the mine managers were adopting a familiar ‘divide and rule’ policy.⁶² Ante Ravlich related this story of his involvement with a Kalgoorlie foreman, which suggests that mine managers avoided stipulations that underground workers be able to speak and understand English in order to build a contingent workforce, but had little regard for the welfare of the migrant workers they employed. Ravlich said:

I can’t get a job, can’t talk. I go to ask [foreman] for job. Manager come up and say, ‘I [would] give you job, but you can’t talk.’ I say, ‘plenty of Yugoslav here working, no talk at all.’ He say, ‘You’re right. I put you with Yugoslav on the mine, if you like. If the inspector come here to see that you talk, if he put you off, I put you off the mine for a day or two ... Then’, he says, ‘I put you [on] again.’ He do that, too. He put me off.⁶³

From 1917 onwards, the Kalgoorlie union movement had another industrial opponent to add to the Chamber of Mines. In response to perceived ALP ‘disloyalty’ during

⁶⁰ *Westralian Worker*, 28 January 1916.

⁶¹ *Westralian Worker*, 4 February 1916.

⁶² P. Bertola, *Ethnic Difference in Kalgoorlie 1893-1934*, unpublished Honours thesis, Murdoch University, 1978, pp. 26-27.

⁶³ Interview with *Ante Ravlich*, conducted by Ed Stokes on 2 August 1982. Tapes held in the National Library of Australia, Canberra, reference no. TRC 1873, Tape 85.

the war, the previously defunct Coolgardie⁶⁴ branch of the Federated Miners' Union (FMU), was revived as a Nationalist union. Its organisers intended that the FMU would provide an industrial home for conservative workers and anti-Labor returned soldiers. Their propaganda labelled AWU activists as 'Bolsheviks' and 'foreign agitators'.⁶⁵ In particular, the 'new' union lobbied those workers who were hostile to a levy that had been struck among miners to support the Fremantle lumpers, but it was not able to win high levels of support on the goldfields for its position, even among many returned soldiers. The Chamber of Mines supported the FMU, describing it as a union 'in which liberty of conscience, and some self-respecting freedom of individual action was possible'.⁶⁶ In the immediate post-war period, members of this bastion of freedom and liberty were active in opposition to the presence of migrant labour on the mines. While the FMU's influence faded in the years after the war, it remained a haven for industrial pacifists – even more so than the AWU!

Geoffrey Blainey maintained that, despite falling wages and the hazards associated with working at great depth in dusty mines, the Kalgoorlie workforce was never militant.⁶⁷ In his view, 'The strike was a rarity. A communist in Kalgoorlie was as rare as a very wet day.'⁶⁸ Although he acknowledged that some tributers were forced to organise against the high prices charged by the companies for use of the mine and its equipment, Blainey argued that the reason for a general lack of militancy was the widespread adoption of tribute mining. This, he concluded, encouraged miners to have not dissimilar aims to the mine owners. Some saved enough to purchase farming land in one of the many areas being opened up under government settler schemes. Others invested their 'high' earnings in local businesses and no longer saw themselves as workers. The last thing many of these miners

⁶⁴ Gold was discovered in Coolgardie in 1892. However, by the turn of the century, the town's importance had faded as much larger deposits were discovered in Kalgoorlie, 37 kilometres to the west.

⁶⁵ 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. 25; J. Williams, *The First Furrow*, Lone Hand Press, Willagee, 1976, p. 78.

⁶⁶ Chamber of Mines of Western Australia (Incorporated), *Monthly Journal*, vol. xviii., parts x, xi, xii, 31 December 1919, p. 121.

⁶⁷ G. Blainey, *The Golden Mile*, Allen and Unwin, St Leonards, 1993.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

wanted, according to Blainey, was a long strike that would close the mines and dramatically reduce local spending. As he saw it:

[t]he tributer was the equivalent of the proprietor of a corner milk-bar. He was an independent miner who worked hard and took risks and occasionally made good money from veins that the big company had missed.⁶⁹

However, despite Blainey's rosy view, conditions in the mining industry did galvanise a small but active branch of the Communist Party in Kalgoorlie. Jack Coleman was, for a time, the Secretary of the East Coolgardie section of the CPA and he estimated that there were sixty members in the section, with approximately half living in Kalgoorlie and Boulder. Although he admitted that some were just 'book members',⁷⁰ he remarked that the CPA had more *bona fide* members than the ALP, where union membership automatically conferred Party membership.⁷¹ Communists were active in goldfields unions and the CPA produced a paper, the *Red Star*, which argued for a more militant response to the terrible conditions on the mines. When asked to describe the state of the labour movement in Kalgoorlie, Bronc Finlay, a leading Communist Party member, provided evocative descriptions of the Labor politicians and right-wing union officials, saying:

Well, you know how the right-wing worked ... they opposed any improvement in the conditions there. They say that the company can't afford things like that ... They just point-blank refused to make any stand against the companies paying a bit more and the same applied to the four ALP members for the area. They used to come to the goldfields and come knocking round ... Hannan's Club. That's the exclusive club. They used to wine and dine with the managers.⁷²

After the CPA's District Party Conference which was held during the Christmas break of 1934/35, it was reported that the Party had grown both in membership and organisation, that eighty per cent of those who attended the conference were trade unionists and that

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 108.

⁷⁰ 'Book members' were those who maintained a formal membership, but were not involved in Party activities.

⁷¹ Interview with *Jack Coleman*, conducted by Stuart Reid on 19 September 1988. Transcript held in the J. S. Battye Library, Perth, reference no: OH2062.

members had been involved in a number of strikes throughout the district.⁷³ As the next chapter details, the Communist Party was also an important anti-racist influence during the 1934 race riots.

The Kalgoorlie sub-branch of the RSL

Of all the Australian states, Western Australia sent more men per head of population to fight in World War One and those who remained on the homefront gave majority support for conscription.⁷⁴ In all, 32,231 men volunteered in Western Australia, almost nineteen per cent of the total male population.⁷⁵ More than six thousand were killed.⁷⁶ For Kalgoorlie and surrounding areas, I have been unable to find a reliable enlistment total, but Welborn's figures suggest that as much as twelve per cent of Western Australia's recruits enlisted on the goldfields and Oliver cited Ernest Scott's view that the 'Western Australian goldfields were outstanding in furnishing recruits'.⁷⁷ Indeed, one recruitment poster emphasised the importance of the Kalgoorlie 'contribution'. On a map of Australia, the poster displayed the names of only six places – Brisbane, Sydney, Melbourne, Hobart, Adelaide (all capital cities) and Kalgoorlie.⁷⁸ While the vast majority of those working class soldiers who returned to Australia were able to rejoin the labour movement, they faced an extremely different industrial environment. Nationalist unions like the FMU mentioned above galvanised a small but significant membership among anti-Labor workers, thereby facilitating an organised political and industrial role for conservative returned service

⁷² Interview with *Bronc Finlay*, conducted by Stuart Reid on 16 November 1988, reference no. OH2071.

⁷³ *Workers' Weekly*, 25 January 1935.

⁷⁴ Bolton, *A Fine Country to Starve In*, p. 11.

⁷⁵ Introduction, *The W. A. Digger Book*, compiled by the Returned Sailors' and Soldiers' Imperial League (W. A. Branch), Perth, 1929.

⁷⁶ *West Australian*, 27 June 1919.

⁷⁷ S. Welborn, *Lords of Death*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Fremantle, 1982, p. 191; Oliver, *War and Peace*, p. 32.

⁷⁸ J. Mordike, 'The Story of Anzac: A new approach', *Journal of the Australian War Memorial*, no. 16, April 1990, p. 4.

personnel. In addition, the ALF and the AWU were temporarily pushed to the left by the threat of the Nationalist unions, creating an intensely polarised political situation.⁷⁹

Because the RSL membership was initially divided on a range of political questions, the conservative leadership took steps to mould a minority of the more conservative returned soldiers into a 'loyal' organisation.⁸⁰ At an early Western Australian RSL Congress, the State President asserted that division among returned men was 'unfortunate'. However, leaders like Colonel Lamb had little orientation towards building a strong organisation under the control of a large rank-and-file membership. Instead, RSL leaders aimed to become well-regarded by politicians and employers and to marginalise the claims of rival organisations. As the State President continued, the officials' main task was to make their organisation 'the only Returned Soldiers' Association in Western Australia, and the only association recognised by the Government'.⁸¹ Part of this project involved the RSL leadership taking action to isolate those radicals who agitated for more left-wing demands. While some returned soldier activists pushed for the League to lobby on the cost of living, unemployment and repudiation of the national debt, the RSL leadership opposed all motions that smacked of opposition to 'responsible Government and the safety and security of the Australian people'.⁸² At a meeting of the left-leaning East Perth branch, a number of anti-Executive resolutions were passed. One asserted that working class issues were 'left to a small number of fighters in the movement; the Tory section always offering the most bitter opposition to any motion of returned men'.⁸³

⁷⁹ For a description of this period, see B. K. de Garis, 'An Incident at Fremantle', *Labour History*, no. 10, 1966.

⁸⁰ B. Oliver, "'The Diggers' Association': A Turning Point in the history of the Western Australian Returned Services League', *Journal of the Australian War Memorial*, no. 23, October 1993.

⁸¹ *West Australian*, 1 May 1918.

⁸² *West Australian*, 20 January 1919.

⁸³ *West Australian*, 28 March 1919.

Moves to isolate the radicals by the RSL Executive were ultimately successful.⁸⁴ Looking back, one prominent leader of the Western Australian branch noted that, after 1921, ‘there was a marked falling-off in the membership returns’,⁸⁵ which the State Executive attributed to returned soldier apathy. Later, it would become the official orthodoxy that it was the radicals who had been responsible for declining membership. Collett remarked that the League’s troubles were ‘in part, due to the intrusion of loud-voiced demagogues ... whose very presence kept many decent people away’.⁸⁶ It is easy to imagine their sagacious nods as they read the words of W. A. Ross, secretary of the Kalgoorlie sub-branch of the RSL, who argued that:

we have people in our ranks who are trying to break the only organisation that has won so much for Diggers and their dependants. Those ex-Soldier scoffers who are too “superior” to join the RSL ... should be heartily ashamed of themselves.⁸⁷

Similar political battles also took place at the local level in this formative period, and Kalgoorlie was generally no exception to wider trends. The AWU and the FMU fought over employment preference on the mines. While the Kalgoorlie RSL had a few members who tried to speak out in defence of labour struggles, they were quickly silenced – the Kalgoorlie RSL would not provide a forum for such ‘disloyal utterances’.⁸⁸

During the war, soldier send-offs in Kalgoorlie had occasioned militant speeches, rousing band music and much fanfare, but preparations for the men’s return were far less systematic. Indeed, in May 1916, the ALF felt sufficiently moved to send a letter of protest to the State War Council regarding the neglect of returned soldiers.⁸⁹ The numerous complaints from returned soldiers alone suggest that the authorities’ responses to the needs

⁸⁴ For a discussion of the influence of the RSL in interwar Western Australia, see M. Brown, *Western Australians and the World: Anti-War Organisations as a Case Study, 1919-1939*, unpublished MA thesis, University of Western Australia, 1981, pp. 73-8.

⁸⁵ Colonel H. B. Collett, ‘The R.S.S.I.L.A. in Western Australia’, *The W. A. Digger Book*, compiled by the Returned Sailors’ and Soldiers’ Imperial League (W. A. Branch), Perth, 1929, p. 17.

⁸⁶ Presidential speech to the Western Australian State Congress, reported in *Reveille*, 31 October 1928.

⁸⁷ *Listening Post*, 20 January 1922.

⁸⁸ See *West Australian*, 8 November 1919.

of returned men were piecemeal and contingent. For instance, rather than properly address the men's concerns, there was a push to repatriate soldiers in regional centres, demonstrating the authorities' apprehension regarding the prospect of a large body of aggrieved and militarised men congregating in the city centre. In the words of the War Council, the plan would 'overcome the difficulty of an accumulation of men in the city, and result in getting them out to the country districts, which is much to be desired, both in the interests of the men and country as a whole'.⁹⁰

Towns outside the metropolis were no better equipped than the city to deal with the enormous problems facing returned soldiers. The Kalgoorlie Council called a public meeting to discuss the issue of returned soldier employment, in response to a State War Council circular urging the creation of employment opportunities for returned men. These jobs were necessary, it was felt, 'to keep them from getting into the habit of loafing about the town'. The same circular stated that only '[a] limited number of employers have been found who have been willing to take such men on and give them light duties, paying them the current minimum rate of wages.'⁹¹ For wounded men who were unable to return to their former occupations, retraining was to begin, in some instances, before the wounded man's medical treatment had even been completed.⁹² Clearly, there were to be no 'undeserving wounded' stalking the streets of Kalgoorlie! In addition, bureaucratic buck-passing developed into an art form. For example, in 1921, an appeal was forwarded to the Minister for Repatriation for a modest £25 to cover the salary and travelling expenses of a lecturer who would deliver a University Extension course for returned soldiers in Kalgoorlie.⁹³ The Minister noted on the Department's file that, while the lectures would be 'most desirable', there were no funds to meet such a request and that the matter should be dealt with by 'non-departmental enterprise'. The applicant, Mr Foley, was duly advised that accession to such

⁸⁹ *Kalgoorlie Miner*, 2 June 1916.

⁹⁰ *Kalgoorlie Miner*, 22 July 1916.

⁹¹ *Kalgoorlie Miner*, 18 July 1916.

⁹² *Kalgoorlie Miner*, 22 July 1916.

⁹³ Letter, G. J. Tracy, Honorary Secretary of the Returned Soldiers' League Polytechnic Society, to George Foley, MP, dated 19 October 1921, NAA: A2487, 1921/18046.

a request might cause an avalanche of similar entreaties and that, anyway, education was the State Government's responsibility.⁹⁴

In 1916, a Letter to the Editor by a self-described stranger to the town noted that the facilities of the Mechanics' Institute were hardly sufficient for the many and varied needs of returned men, particularly for those who were wounded. The writer proposed that the patriotic citizens of the town get together to provide a properly fitted-out soldier's meeting place – 'a club house without the beer', as he primly described it.⁹⁵ A few weeks later, another article alluded to the consequences of leaving returned men with little to occupy themselves, arguing that 'the lads [were] hardly to blame' for getting up to mischief if the town did not repay their debt to the men in the form of diverting amenities.⁹⁶ Under the supervision of the Red Cross Society and its Honorary Secretary, Mrs H. N. Curle Smith, a Soldiers' Club was set up on the second floor of Mackenzie's Buildings, on the corner of Hannan and Maritana Streets in Kalgoorlie.⁹⁷ A sub-committee was formed to organise the facilities for the new club and, after it was officially opened, control passed to a house committee comprising nine returned soldiers. A committee of women was given 'the privilege of organising the catering'.⁹⁸ Lists of requirements for the new club were published and the townspeople were asked to contribute furniture, food, reading material and the like. Concerts, competitions and card nights were held to raise money to cover day-to-day expenses.

A ceremony to officially open the Soldiers' Club was held in April 1916, with seventeen returned soldiers becoming members that afternoon. A shortfall of £60 between

⁹⁴ Tracy's letter was forwarded to Senator Millen, Minister for Repatriation, on 19 October 1921. Millen's note on file dated 16 November 1921. NAA: A2487, 1921/18046.

⁹⁵ *Kalgoorlie Miner*, 24 February 1916. These attitudes mirror those of anxious 'do-gooders' around the country. See, for example, T. King, 'Saving the Returned Men: The Soldiers' Lounge, St Paul's Cathedral', *Victorian Historical Journal*, vol. 65, no. 2, 1994.

⁹⁶ *The Sun*, 26 March 1916.

⁹⁷ *Kalgoorlie Miner*, 21 March 1916. Mrs Curle Smith was the wife of the town engineer. She reflected the middle and upper class nature of the leaderships of such benevolent organisations. Mrs Curle Smith was simultaneously the Honorary Secretary for the Red Cross and the Soldiers' Institute. See M. McKernan, *The Australian People and the Great War*, Nelson, West Melbourne, 1980, p. 67; Western Australian Post Office Directory, Wise's Directories, Perth, 1916.

expenditure and donations was announced by the Mayor of Kalgoorlie, with a concomitant exhortation that ‘it was incumbent on the people of the fields’ to fully support the returned men.⁹⁹ Shortly afterwards, the Boulder returned servicemen refused to attend the local Anzac Day commemoration concert in protest at the scanty disbursement of funds for their benefit, demonstrating a more proletarian orientation than their Kalgoorlie comrades. Soldiers were quoted as saying: ‘These concerts are promoted for the purpose of raising money in our interests, but we never see any of it.’¹⁰⁰ Some evidence for the veracity of their complaints can be found in a request put to Senator Pearce during his visit to the Kalgoorlie RSL in 1922. The local leadership suggested that undisbursed patriotic funds collected during the war should be handed to the RSL, a suggestion that echoed similar propositions made at the Federal level, and implied that there were considerable funds at stake.¹⁰¹

In 1919, the executive of the Soldiers’ Club requested that they be able to use the Kalgoorlie Chamber of Commerce building for their clubrooms, as the stairs in their current premises were proving too difficult for some of the wounded men. The Chamber of Commerce approved the request.¹⁰² Acting Prime Minister Watt visited the goldfields briefly in 1919 and took time to visit the new Soldiers’ Institute in Dugan Street. He remarked on the pleasant nature of the facilities, which he thought ‘would promote feelings of good fellowship among returned men, and tend to keep them within the ranks of useful, loyal citizens’. He also felt sure that those who ‘lived under the kindly influence of institutes like the one in Kalgoorlie would be the very last to become Bolsheviks’.¹⁰³

⁹⁸ *Kalgoorlie Miner*, 28 March 1916

⁹⁹ *Kalgoorlie Miner*, 13 April 1916. In 1918, the War Council authorised the production of an Anzac Day commemoration postcard that could be sent to soldiers on active duty to demonstrate that Kalgoorlie’s citizens were ‘doing their bit’. All proceeds were to go to the RSL. Copy of card held in the National Library of Australia.

¹⁰⁰ *Kalgoorlie Miner*, 28 April 1916.

¹⁰¹ Letter, Senator Pearce, Minister for Home and Territories Department to Senator Millen, Minister for Repatriation Department, dated 31 May 1922. NAA: A2487, 1922/8111.

¹⁰² *Kalgoorlie Miner*, 8 August 1919.

¹⁰³ *Kalgoorlie Miner*, 22 August 1919.

Initially, however, class tensions were clearly visible in the Kalgoorlie RSL, although such dissension was rapidly suppressed. In August 1919, the Kalgoorlie RSL organised a street march and public meeting to promote the organisation's aims. The last to speak was W. A. Ross, DCM, the then secretary of the Kalgoorlie sub-branch. Reflecting the political disagreements that dogged the RSL in its early years, Ross remarked, reportedly to much laughter, that he would not stray into political questions.¹⁰⁴ He did, however, express his personal view that returned soldiers would not scab on unionists, nor work for non-union wages. In his opinion, it was the high cost of living that was responsible for the current social unrest. In response to this speech, Harry Axford, president of the Kalgoorlie sub-branch and chair of the meeting, reportedly told Ross to 'cut it out' and announced the meeting closed.¹⁰⁵ Ironically, the conservative *Sun* newspaper argued that this event demonstrated the fundamental unity between returned soldiers, that the 'order and discipline' on display were most commendable and that returned men on the goldfields were clearly not seeking to 'have [their grievances] redressed by playing up and breaking things', a prophesy not borne out by subsequent events.¹⁰⁶

There was no 'fundamental unity' in the early years of the RSL, but it was gradually achieved by the leadership through a process of conversion and/or expulsion. Shortly after this meeting, two radical RSL members from East Perth, Gorman and O'Neill,¹⁰⁷ visited the Kalgoorlie RSL to urge them to break a contract that was putting AWU men off the job and had cut existing rates for the carting of sandalwood. The visit was not appreciated and the

¹⁰⁴ This statement reflected the official view, alluded to in the previous chapter, that engaging in party politics would split returned soldiers. Early in 1919, Mr Brodribb, its president, had vowed that the Kalgoorlie members 'would stand out against politics to the last, whatever the people on the coast thought'. Later, he remarked that returned soldiers were being forced to participate in party politics because 'both sides were trying ... to make use of soldiers'. However, the censure of Ross suggests that the RSL was much more concerned about possible returned soldier involvement in labour movement struggles. *West Australian*, 23 January, 2 June 1919.

¹⁰⁵ *Kalgoorlie Miner*, 4 August 1919.

¹⁰⁶ *The Sun*, 10 August 1919. Ironically, in the very next issue of this newspaper, the Editor was forced to lament that the soldiers had, indeed, played up and broken lots of things, as Chapter Five shows. However, with the headline – *The Dago Must Go* – complete sympathy was given to the mostly returned soldier rioters. *The Sun*, 17 August 1919.

¹⁰⁷ For an account of Gorman and O'Neill's attempts to link returned servicemen with the labour movement, see Oliver, 'The Diggers' Association'.

approaches of the men were rebuffed. The Kalgoorlie sub-branch meeting defended the principle of ‘freedom of contract’ and resolved to protest to the State Executive of the RSL for ‘doing their best to cause dissension and agitation among our members’.¹⁰⁸ By November 1919, Ross, too, had become a staunch critic of the AWU and its campaign to get FMU labour off the mines.¹⁰⁹ After surviving at least one expulsion motion, O’Neill was finally expelled by the State Executive for sending an ‘offensive’ telegram to the Federal President of the RSL regarding cash payments to returned soldiers.¹¹⁰

From the RSL’s inception, its leadership promised to make every effort to find jobs for returned soldiers. Despite official insistence that jobs were a ‘right’ that returned soldiers should be able to expect, its less stated intention was to contain the discontent of returned men and to turn them into ‘useful’ citizens. However, the nature of its efforts demonstrated that the RSL leadership’s primary loyalty was to employers and workplace efficiency. For example, in 1919, the Secretary of the Kalgoorlie sub-branch wrote to the Commissioner of Railways to express appreciation for the policy of returned soldier employment preference on the Transcontinental railway line. The letter assured the Commissioner that:

we hold no brief for the incompetent, or negligent employee, whom it may be the bad luck of the Department to obtain from our ranks ... we are not asking for preference without being able to supply men with credentials and references to carry out the duties he may be applying for.¹¹¹

During the 1930s Depression, pressure again mounted on the Kalgoorlie RSL to find jobs for unemployed returned men through its employer connections. The sub-branch journal would frequently thank local businesses for their support, and would return such favours by

¹⁰⁸ *Kalgoorlie Miner*, 6 August 1919.

¹⁰⁹ *Kalgoorlie Miner*, 12 December 1919.

¹¹⁰ *West Australian*, 9, 17 April, 10 December 1919. O’Neill was indicted under Clause 42 of the RSL’s Constitution which rendered a member liable for expulsion if, among other things, they were ‘guilty of conduct unbecoming a gentleman or subversive of the objects of the League’. Rules and Objects of the RSSILA, Department of Repatriation file, dated 12 November 1917. NAA: A2483, B18/716.

¹¹¹ Letter, W. A. Ross, Secretary of the Kalgoorlie sub-branch of the RSL to Mr Bell, Commissioner of Railways, Melbourne, dated 19 January 1919. NAA: A2487, 1919/2020.

exhorting all loyal citizens to buy locally-made produce. In the middle of 1933, the Boulder sub-branch was pleased to report that, since the previous October, eighty-six jobs had been found for ex-soldiers. The majority of these men were placed in jobs at the quarries and at 'one of the few places where the ex-soldier does get absolute preference' – the Transcontinental railway line. 'Grateful thanks' were also extended to the manager at the Lake View and Star mine, who had proved to be 'a good friend to the ex-soldier'.¹¹²

However, the League could offer little comfort in harsh economic times. By 1934, it was placing advertisements to the effect that there was little work on the fields, despite rumours to the contrary, and that the RSL's Distress Fund was 'almost exhausted'.¹¹³ Indeed, in some cases, non-member constituents became a convenient target for condemnation at this time. The secretary of the Boulder sub-branch pointed out that one hundred ex-soldiers had gained employment on the Transcontinental Line but, despite many promises to the contrary, only fifteen of those had joined the sub-branch. It was bitterly noted that many of these recalcitrants, if unemployed again, would turn to the League for further assistance.¹¹⁴

The relationship between the RSL leadership and the mine managers was far more cosy. The attendance at the 1933 Kalgoorlie RSL's annual Anzac smoke social indicated a clear community of interest between the RSL leadership and the 'respectable' section of Kalgoorlie's population. During the formal part of the evening, a toast to the mining industry was made. F. G. Brinsden, manager of the South Kalgurlie mine, Mr Blackett of the Boulder Perseverance and Mr Thorne of the Lake View and Star responded and 'paid excellent tributes to the work of the RSL'. For his part, Inspector Spedding-Smith made favourable comments about the cooperation between the police department and the League.¹¹⁵ In returning the compliments of these men, RSL executives were not acting as grateful beneficiaries of official support; they were participating in the mutual back-

¹¹² *The Listening Post*, 23 June 1933, p. 20.

¹¹³ *The Listening Post*, 24 August 1934, p. 25.

¹¹⁴ *The Listening Post*, 23 November 1934, p. 8.

¹¹⁵ *Kalgoorlie Miner*, 24 April 1933.

slapping of social equals. In that year, the President of the local sub-branch was Captain R. R. Gibbs, a bank manager, while its Secretary was Lieutenant-Colonel Thomas Fairley, who was also Country Vice President of the Western Australian branch and the nephew of General Leane.¹¹⁶

Having an elite leadership directly affected the type of work deemed appropriate for the League. Indeed, the RSL sub-branches on the goldfields undertook activities on behalf of worker members that more closely resembled bourgeois philanthropy than an effort to improve the ‘rights’ of returned soldiers. In a similar way to church groups, the RSL used charitable works to help spread conservative influence. During the 1933 Christmas period, the Kalgoorlie and Boulder sub-branches took it upon themselves to dispense a little Christmas cheer laced with social control. They visited the Children’s Ward at the Government Hospital bearing gifts of slippers, followed by a trip to the Maternity Section to dispense rattles to all the prolific mothers – special mention was made of the star performer who had produced twins. Next, they descended upon the General Ward and the St John of God Hospital ‘where ten returned men, most of them not members of the League, were each given a Xmas parcel containing a battle of wine [sic], some fruit, smokes and sweets’. They then made a ‘straight track’ for the Soldier’s Institute for a drinking session. Toasts were made to ‘those who had made the event possible’, to ‘Father Xmas’, to ‘the local governing bodies’, to the ‘Matron and staff’, to the ‘Mother Superior and staff’, to ‘the medical profession generally’, and to round it all off, the ‘Toast of the Chairman’ and to ‘a delightful morning’s good deed’.¹¹⁷

Anzac Day in Kalgoorlie was always an occasion of particular pomp and ceremony, with commemorations held at various memorials. These events were always used as a chance to drum up membership for the League, but many ex-soldiers seemed to be resistant

¹¹⁶ Letter, Australian War Memorial to RSL Sydney, Australian War Memorial, reference no. 12/4/57/33, AWM93 12/11/2230.

¹¹⁷ *Kalgoorlie Digger*, January 1934. The *Kalgoorlie Digger* was a typed news sheet, distributed to all members of the sub-branch. This article contained so many typographical errors that I have corrected all but one to assist legibility.

to the notion, perhaps as a result of the close links between it and the employers. School children, too, felt the full force of RSL rhetoric. Local League officials were active in spreading national sentiment and supervising loyal conduct in the area. At the Eighteenth Annual State Congress, a motion moved by Lieutenant Colonel Fairley from Kalgoorlie was passed that:

Congress recommends to the Minister for Education that the saluting of the Australian flag be part of the curriculum for all State Schools and that the rite be observed on the first day of every school week.¹¹⁸

The RSL was at the forefront when the Duke of Gloucester visited Kalgoorlie. It arranged for 1,500 school children to present themselves to ‘H.R.H.’ and ‘the good behaviour of the children was freely commented upon’.¹¹⁹

In the League’s view, Australia was to become a classless, indivisible, cohesive, white entity and the leadership was determined to play an authoritative role in the dissemination of such ideology. That the RSL was a nation-building organisation was evident during the 1933 Western Australian push to secede from the rest of the country, and to be ruled directly by the British government.¹²⁰ Prominent secessionists had always been able to tap into a widespread sense of aggrieved localism, blaming chronic Federal Government indifference for Western Australia’s problems.¹²¹ Sizeable numbers of Western Australians harboured suspicions about the dubious benefits associated with distant eastern states alliances, as demonstrated by the continuing popularity of the secession debate. This sentiment had also been reflected in the Western Australian RSL’s diffident entry into the federal body. With seventy sub-branches in 1918 and a degree of

¹¹⁸ *The Listening Post*, 26 October 1934, p. 9.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

¹²⁰ Despite lack of support from the Nationalist Premier and the Labor Party, sixty-eight per cent of Western Australians voted in a 1933 referendum to secede from the Federation. See G. Bolton, ‘The Civil War We Never Had’, *Proceedings of the Third Conference of The Samuel Griffith Society*, November, 1993, p. 89.

¹²¹ ‘The Case for the People of Western Australia (Western Australia) 1934’, presented to the British Government in 1934 to support the secession of the State from the Federation, ‘made the discriminatory effects of national policy on the residents of Western Australia a central component of its case’. C. Sharman,

influence at all levels of government, the Western Australian branch argued that they were independently successful and were reluctant to authorise expenditure to a detached body that might offer little to local veterans. The Western Australian branch eventually affiliated in 1918 after obtaining a promise that joining the national body would not be financially detrimental.¹²²

Such a parochial attitude on the part of the Western Australian RSL members contradicted the Federal Executive's systematic promotion of Australian nationalism. The Federal President of the League, G. J. C. Dyett, became alarmed that the Western Australian Branch was not taking a firm position against secession. Indeed, its leaders were not. They sensed that if they spoke against secession, sufficient numbers of rank-and-file returned soldiers supported secession to cause a split in the Western Australian RSL. A stern letter from Dyett argued that it was the 'duty' of the League to show 'courageous leadership' on the question of national unity, and that it was 'desirable that the necessary psychology be created at the earliest possible date'. He issued an unveiled threat that, if the State Executive would not spread the appropriate propaganda against secession and stand up to demands for 'states rights', then the Federal Executive would appeal directly to Western Australian ex-servicemen and women through the press. Dyett closed his letter by saying, 'let the League guide the people of West Australia in their hour of doubt and thus vindicate its claim to being a great National Empire-building organisation'.¹²³

Despite misgivings about secession, the national implications of the White Australia policy were heartily endorsed by the Western Australian Branch of the RSL. As Chapter Five details, returned soldier harassment of migrants was a recurrent feature of wartime xenophobia and, while leading citizens and newspaper editorials 'tut-tutted' about ruffian behaviour and the need for law and order, perpetrators were often treated leniently by the

'Secession and Federalism', *Proceedings of the Third Conference of The Samuel Griffith Society*, November, 1993, p. 100.

¹²² G. Kristianson, *The Politics of Patriotism: The Pressure Group Activities of the Returned Servicemen's League*, Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1966, pp. 11-12.

¹²³ Federal Executive to State Branch, Perth, 14 March 1933, National Library of Australia, MS 6609, item 6786.

court system. For example, in October 1916, two such cases were brought before Mr Walter of the Kalgoorlie Police Court. One eighteen year old soldier had stolen a watch, a gold nugget, a pocket knife, cigars and coins from a man named Siegfried Christian Larsen. Captain Corbett, an officer from Military Intelligence, was at the court hearing in a personal capacity and offered to become a bondsman for the thief. Although the soldier pleaded guilty, Mr Walter concluded that he had not really intended to steal and so gave him a six-month good behaviour bond. The other soldier had been found on the premises of a Richard Krahn and had been charged with intent to steal. The magistrate lectured the soldier that his actions were a discredit to the army he had served, that his behaviour smacked of ‘a trick caught from the Germans’, and then allowed him to go.¹²⁴

To marginalise migrant workers, the Kalgoorlie sub-branch drafted motions that blamed southern European immigration for employment problems on the mines. They also called for restrictions on immigration numbers, the more strict enforcement of language tests, and made dire warnings about the social dangers of non-British immigration. Evidence of their unceasing efforts in this regard can be discerned in the following motion passed at the 1934 State Congress, which read:

That representations be made to the State Parliament on the question of restriction of alien labour in the mining and other industries in order that the decision of a previous Congress on this matter be given effect to.¹²⁵

Some members resorted to ‘poetry’ to fan racist sentiment, although even some of their best friends may have wished them not to. In March 1935, the *Kalgoorlie Digger* waxed lyrical about the sturdy characteristics of ‘The Britisher’. One stanza proclaimed:

¹²⁴ *Kalgoorlie Miner*, 4 October 1916.

¹²⁵ Motion moved by Lt. Col. T. C. Fairley, 18th Annual Congress of the Western Australian RSL, *The Listening Post*, 26 October 1934. At this time, Fairley was Secretary of the Kalgoorlie sub-branch and editor of its newsletter, the *Kalgoorlie Digger*.

*Who carries the flag from Pole to Pole,
And does it without a fuss?
Who's made the world what it is today –
Whatever the foreign rabble say?
The Britisher – old cuss.*

In the same issue, a full page was allotted to extolling the virtues of the White Australia policy, which, the article stated, was a 'real live factor' to the RSL. Further, it argued:

America with her teeming millions of half breeds due to the intermarrying of all nationals should be a standing example for the world where the White Australia policy is in question. We are a nation, in every sense of the word and the League intends to do its utmost to see that we remain one and not a dumping ground for the unwanted of other nations. Our women are sacred to us – an infringement of our Policy may mean sacrilege there.

The RSL position contained a number of contradictions that should be explained. Apart from the general prejudices that were part and parcel of dominant racist ideology, the RSL portrayed its opposition to southern European immigration as partially motivated by concern for white workers' living standards. In reality, as Oliver argued, the League's industrial interventions showed a blatant 'indifference' towards award conditions.¹²⁶ Racism was a way of drawing in working class members by expressing concern about employment levels and working conditions, without appearing to support trade union activity. RSL officials also took an active part in national League debates about the presence of southern Europeans on the goldfields, and in Australia at large. On the surface, its position on immigration seemed contradictory. It supported the employers' right to search for the cheapest labour while, at the same time, was committed to a 'White Australia' and encouraged opposition to all but British immigration. As a result, their stance helped to marginalise southern Europeans in Kalgoorlie, while not effectively limiting their arrival.

¹²⁶ Oliver, *War and Peace*, p. 143.

Conclusion

In Kalgoorlie, the Chamber of Mines, the ALP, the AWU and the CPA occupied important strategic positions in local race relations. While the Chamber of Mines clearly did not welcome industrial stoppages over the presence of migrant labour on the mines, they were prepared to risk employing migrant workers on the most 'unskilled' work. If racism further isolated such workers and protected continuing low wages, so much the better. The ALP and the AWU, operating as middle-men in the class struggle, strongly identified with Australian nationalism and racial solidarity. However, this political position contradicted a more fundamental requirement among the organised workers they 'represented' for industrial unity as a basis for successful trade unionism. While commitment to White Australia may well have been politically expedient, it did not help them to recruit migrant workers. The CPA's formal commitment to opposing the White Australia policy offered a political way forward for those members of the labour movement who recognised the debilitating effects of racial disharmony among workers, but its ability to actively promote this position was hampered by its size and influence. An assessment of the interaction between all these organisations raises important questions about just which groups benefited from racial division.

During the interwar years, the Kalgoorlie RSL sub-branch was extremely active in containing any signs of radical politics. The Soldiers' Club provided an important avenue for bringing together a group of returned soldiers who were committed to conservatism and who, just as Watt had predicted, were the 'very last to become Bolsheviks'. The local sub-branch made common cause with local employers, town burghers and conservative political parties. Certainly, whenever workplace efficiency was at stake, the RSL leadership sided with employers over returned soldier employment preference. One important avenue for appealing to its working class constituency was on the basis of racism, representing support for a 'White Australia' as a demonstration of concern for the living standards of white workers. As the next chapter will demonstrate, this position was not universally endorsed

by Kalgoorlie unionists, as sections of the labour movement began to realise the political, industrial and social costs of endorsing the racist strategies of their workplace adversaries.