William H 'Bill' Mellor and the Perth-Fremantle building trades strikes of 1896-97

11,598 words/ 16,890 with notes

When Bill Mellor lost his footing on a ten-metre scaffold in 1897, that misstep cost him his life, his wife and three children their provider, the Builders' Labourers' Society in Western Australia its most energetic official, and socialism a champion. On Thursday, 11 June, the 35-year old Mellor had been working on the Commercial Union Assurance offices on St Georges Terrace when he tumbled backwards, breaking his back, to die in hospital a few hours later.[1]

In the days that followed, the labour movement rallied to support Mellor's family. Bakers, boot-makers, printers and tailors sent subscription lists around their workplaces;[2] the donations from twenty building jobs totaled £174 9s 4d, while Mellor's employer and associates contributed £50.[3] The Kalgoorlie and Boulder Workers Association forwarded their collections with notes of appreciation for Mellor's organising in Melbourne and Sydney.[4] The Perth and Fremantle Councils provided their Town Halls without charge for benefit concerts.[5] The Relief Fund realised £45 from the sale of Mellor's house and allotment, in Burt Street, Forrest Hill, a housing estate in North Perth.[6] The Fund's trustees paid out £15 on the funeral, to which a florist donated wreaths,[7] while a further

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[1] *West Australian* (*WA*), 10 June 1897, p. 4; the building opened in December, *WA*, 2 December 1897, p. 3.

[2] *WA*, 29 June 1897, p. 4, 6 July 1897, p. 4, 30 July 1897, p. 4; the Bakers' Union donated three guineas and collected £5 2s; Bootmakers, £7 4s, the Tailors £4 10s and Fremantle Lumpers two guineas, *WA*, 5 February 1898, p. 1.

[3] *WA*, 5 February 1898, p. 1; in February, Mellor's employer had refused to pay the shilling-a-day increase for which Mellor campaigned as a BLS official, *WA*, 2 February 1897, p. 3.

West Australia had an Employers' Liability Act from 1894 but no Workers' Compensation Act until 1902**,** H J Gibbney, 'Working Class Organisation in Western Australia 1880-1901', BA Thesis, University of Western Australia, 1949, p. 74; evidence of carpenter W J Diver, Report of the Select Committee on the Workers' Compensation Act Amendment Bill, *Western Australia, Minutes and Votes and Proceedings of the Parliament*, 1910-11, vol. II, pp. 23-26. The Liability Act encouraged magistrates to deny a victim any award if the employer could argue that the worker had contributed in any way to the injury, see the judgement against a stonemason, who then had to bear the defendant's costs, *WA*, 22 May 1897, p. 7.

[4] *WA*, 3 July 1897, p. 4. The Kalgoorlie and Boulder Workers' Association sent £10, *WA*, 5 February 1898, p. 1.

[5] *WA*, 27 July 1897, p. 7; Gymnastics 'Professor' Richard Walker arranged the Fremantle benefit concert, which concluded with limelight effects of historical scenes – were any political? A procession of performers in Perth meant that, before the program wound up at 11 pm, the Gallery had turned rowdy, *WA*, 6 July 1897, p. 2. After expenses, Perth cleared £50 and Fremantle £24, *WA*, 5 February 1898, p. 1.

[6] We can assume that this money came from sale of land and for the small amount that Mellor had paid off the mortgage. In May 1897, a four-room house in Subiaco sold for £150, on a £60 deposit, *Morning Herald* (*MH*), 15 May 1897, p. 12. In March 1896, blocks in Subiaco could be had for £18 on ten percent deposit with the balance over twelve months, when a weatherboard three-room cottage cost £240, *WA*, 5 March 1896, p. 2. Deposits on cottages were around a quarter of their sale prices, which was more than six months' wages for a labourer. How did Mellor accumulate the savings to afford a deposit? Had he been to Coolgardie?

[7] *WA*, 17 June 1897, p. 4, 6 July 1897, p. 2, 7 July 1897, p. 6.

£6 3s went on a headstone. The passages for Mellor's family to England cost £35. After further expenses of £125, including £54 for two canvassers,[8] the Fund was left with £193, the equivalent of sixty-five weeks wages for an experienced labourer at the rate of ten shillings a day.[9]

PART I – 'He was a man'

Within a small community of newcomers, these responses to the death of a young father were to be expected. The collection was also a tribute to someone whom one correspondent recalled as having 'spared neither himself nor his purse' on behalf of others.[10] What is remarkable is that Mellor had been far from conventional. In word and deed, he had put himself outside the circle of respectability as understood by the establishment at Perth's Weld Club. In response to a letter denigrating his character, Mellor had welcomed the charge of having been an 'agitator' on the Yarra Bank and the Sydney Domain, but bridled at an insinuation that he had taken so much as a shilling for his efforts.[11] An obituary by a comrade back East recalled Mellor as

> the sworn foe to the tricksters and trimmers, and politicians, who would make the labour movement subservient to their own selfishness and ambitions. He was a giant in the socialist fight; and, though we fully recognise that no individual is indispensable to the movement, he was one whose loss we could ill afford. He was faithful, brave, and true in the fight. He was a man. And now he is dead.[12]

His burial was preceded by a gathering at the Labour Church, indicating his secularist outlook.[13] Pall-bearers included his comrade, Monty Miller, who, on the evening of the funeral, took Mellor's place on the Labour Church platform to speak on the dead man's chosen subject, 'Woman's Position as a Worker'. Four weeks before, Mellor had set down his principles when he took as his text 'the poor ye have always with ye', a remark which the rich perverted to justify their inequities. He saw his task as encouraging the exploited in fellowship: 'As matters stood, men worked side by side, and very often did not know, and did not seek to know each other's names'.[14]

Five years earlier, as depression laid waste to Victoria, Mellor had organised Melbourne's unemployed. In January 1892, he had been one of four delegates, alongside the anarchist 'Chummy' Fleming,[15] to the Progressive Political League which agreed to

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[8] *WA*, 9 February 1898, p. 5, 15 February 1898, p. 5.
[9] *WA*, 5 February 1898, pp. 1 and 4.
[10] *WA*, 'Letter', 9 February 1898, p. 5.
[11] *WA*, 13 March 1897, p. 12.
[12] *Northern People*, 3 July 1897, [p. 5]; see Mellor's letter to the *Socialist*, 11 July 1896, [p. 1] in support of an editorial (30 May 1896, [p. 2]) which had said that the Labor party was 'well rid' of politicians who did not propagandise outside parliament.
[13] K S Inglis, 'The Labour Church Movement', *International Journal of Social History*, 3**,** 1958, pp. 445-60; the formation of the Labour Church in England in 1891 had prompted some interest while Mellor was still in Melbourne, 'Editorial', *Commonweal*, 7 May 1892, [p. 2], a letter in opposition, 4 June 1892, [p. 3], an article by 'Ucello', 18 June 1892 [p. 1], and a poem, 2 July 1892 [p. 3]; for the Perth version, see Gibbney, Thesis, pp. 91-92, *WA*, 12 July 1897, p. 4.
[14] *WA*, 17 May 1897, p. 4.
[15] Bob James, 'John William Fleming', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, volume 8, MUP, Carlton, 1981, pp. 521-2; Paul Avrich, 'An Australian Anarchist: J W Fleming', *Anarchist Portraits*, Princeton

join a committee with the Trades Hall Council to 'guide and control the unemployed movement'.[16] Far from exercising restraint over the desperate, Mellor led them in Rent Revision, evicting bailiffs and re-repossessing chattels from auction rooms,[17] an active service which caused a reform-minded weekly, *Commonweal,* to lump him in with 'men of doubtful calibre'.[18]

In June 1892, Mellor complained that, despite the recent entry of a handful of Labor representatives into the legislature, the Assembly had spent more time debating the stock tax than on providing work. Voicing what one contemporary called 'The Bitter Cry of Outcast Melbourne',[19] Mellor alleged that the workers' tribunes had kept quiet. When a union official replied that the ministry had to be dealt with 'in the proper spirit', Mellor shot back 'Crawl!' He articulated the anger among the jobless in the Trades Hall gallery by denouncing these 'so-called labour members' who 'owed their position to the Trades Hall and the unemployed and should be governed by them'.[20] One of those backsliders was the Labor member for Richmond, W A Trenwith, himself once a paid agitator for the unions, who now distanced himself from 'indecent excesses'.[21]

In 1893, Mellor moved north to resume his Rent Revisions in Sydney. Although he became a delegate to the NSW Trades and Labor Council and secretary of the Darlington Branch of the Political Labour League, his heart and brain swept him past

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University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1988, pp. 260-69; Bob James, *Anarchism and state violence in Sydney and Melbourne, 1886-1896,* privately printed, Newcastle, 1986.

[16] *Commonweal,* 6 February 1892, [p. 2].

[17] *Northern People,* 3 July 1897, [p. 5]. For the removal, with menaces, of a sewing machine from a shop in Fitzroy, see *Age,* 11 June 1892, p. 9; Mellor's activities could have supplied some of the incidents and attitudes in the opening section of David A Andrade, *The Melbourne Riots and How Harry Holdfast and His Friends Emancipated the Workers*, Andrade's Bookstore, Melbourne, 1892; cf. Mark Hearn, 'A wild awakening: the 1893 Banking Crisis and the Theatrical Narratives of the Castlereagh Street Radicals', *Labour History*, 85, November 2003, pp. 153-71.

[18] *Commonweal,* 11 June 1892, [p. 2].

Some sense of the militancy around Mellor can be gained from two incidents in the pit of the 1890s depression. On 9 June 1892, a tumult of the jobless prevented all meetings inside the Trades Hall, *Age,* 11 June 1892, p. 9; six nights later, sixty constables and nine mounted police controlled a torchlight procession outside Trenwith's home in Richmond, which called on him to resign his seat in parliament as 'a traitor to the trust which had been reposed in him', *Age,* 16 June 1892, p. 6; in a further exchange at the Trades Hall, Mellor said that expressing confidence in Trenwith was a waste of time, *Commonweal*, 9 July 1892, [p. 3].

[19] *Commonweal*, 4 June 1892, [p. 3]; a pamphlet by 'W B D' noted in *Commonweal,* 30 April 1892 [p. 2].

[20] *Commonweal,* 4 June 1892, [p. 3], *Age,* 11 June 1892, p. 9.

[21] Bruce Scates, *A New Australia: citizenship, radicalism and the First Republic*, Cambridge University Press, South Melbourne, 1997, p. 164, attributes the phrase 'proper spirit' to Trenwith whereas *Commonweal* reported its coming from a Mr Drew. Mellor's letter correcting *Commonweal*'s account of his views about parliamentarians left this researcher uncertain of what he meant by opposing 'political domination of the Trades Hall or any other body'. Although he had called on Labour and Liberal members to push for public works, he dismissed as 'twaddle' the notion that he regarded Messrs Patterson and Harpur as 'Labour representatives', 11 June 1892, [p. 3].

Four years later, Mellor declined to welcome Trenwith when he passed through Perth on his honeymoon to England, *WA,* 23 September 1896, p. 4; Mellor failed to find a seconder for his objecting to the TLC's having spent £3 17s 4d on a cable to Trenwith asking him to break his journey; Mellor argued that the account should have been met from the funds collected for that purpose through a subscription list, *WA,* 26 February 1897, p. 2. The Council's interest in Trenwith was part of its moves to create a Labor Party for the 1897 elections, J H Gibbney, 'Western Australia', D J Murphy (ed.), *Labor in Politics, the state labor parties in Australia 1880-1920,* University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1975, p. 347.

from those channels.[22] After a spell with the Australian Socialist League, he became foundation secretary of the Social-Democratic Federation for which he lectured every Sunday in its Pitt Street rooms after addressing crowds of up to 1,000 along Bathurst Street. In Perth by 1896, he distributed the Federation's paper, the *Socialist*, collecting £5 5s 6d for the 'Socialist Imprisonment Fund'.[23]

Five months before Mellor's fall, he had been the foremost leader of the biggest strike that Perth and Fremantle had known. Seeing beyond the assumptions of the Trades and Labour Council (TLC), he warned a mass meeting from all the building trades that their employers were 'their natural and fierce opponents'. Craft unionism, he explained, had served its purpose and now had to be replaced by an industrial union with the strength to boycott scabs and to sustain a strike fund.[24] At the peak of the dispute, building workers selected Mellor to chair their strike committee, and a wider group of unions later chose him to preside over the eight-hours committee.[25] Through the Democratic Reform League and the Labour Church, he organised May Day celebrations on the Esplanade, greeting all those across the world who were struggling for reform.[26]

PART II - Getting organised

The character of both the 1897 confrontation and of Mellor as its proletarian protagonist is best approached against the backdrop of the organisation of labour in the colony from the early 1880s. As everywhere, the movement's growth was fractured, with false starts, spurts and stumbles, some determined by the business cycle, others by political fortunes and not a few by governmental intervention. This sketch tracks around the emergence of the Builders' Labourers' Society as a prelude to detailing the 1897 dispute.

In May 1883, a few workers met in Perth to press for an eight-hour day, but to little effect. Fremantle carpenters made a start in trade unionism during 1884 by forming an outpost of Britain's Amalgamated Society of Carpenters and Joiners (ASC&J). Other building tradesmen, including the labourers who assisted them, followed their lead, as did printers, railwaymen, miners and wharf lumpers. An eight-hours committee in May 1886 included four labourers. By August, many employers had conceded a nine-hour day, though with a proportionate cut in wages.[27] The incipience of the labour movement was

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[22] *Northern People*, 3 July 1897, [p. 5]; he also spoke on behalf of the Labor party at the Eveleigh railway workshops, *Australian Workman*, 19 May 1894, p. 8.

[23] Mellor combined with Hugh de Largie who had come across to Kalgoorlie from the Socialist League in the Hunter Valley. Verity Burgmann, *In our time: socialism and the rise of Labor, 1885-1905*, George Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1985, p. 163; Burgmann provides no references for this information, but they can be found in *Socialist*, 5 December 1896, [p. 2]. She confuses the amount from the West with the total collected, £25 13s 10d. The fund had been set up to support the wife of Harry Holland while he was in prison for not paying a fine for criminally libeling a labour agent during a coal dispute, *Socialist*, 6 June 1896 [p. 2], 29 August 1896, [pp. 2-3], 17 October 1896, [p. 3]; Patrick O'Farrell, *Harry Holland, Militant Socialist*, ANU Press, Canberra, 1964, pp. 13-14.

[24] *WA*, 13 February 1897, p. 5.

[25] *WA*, 2 February 1897, p. 5, 22 May 1897, p. 5.

[26] *WA*, 3 May 1897, p. 4, sentiments supported by the Rev. Dr Zillman, a free-thought speaker from the United States, who could also lecture on Mahometanism, *WA*, 5 February 1898, p. 4.

[27] T A Coghlan, *Labour and Industry in Australia*, Macmillan, South Melbourne, 1969 reprint, Volume III, p. 1569. Some details of Coghlan's account of the West are doubtful, for instance, that 150 free labourers

on show when officials from the ASC&J had to speak for the navvies laid off from a rail project after loan funds dried up in 1887.[28] A revival of the eight-hour committee in October 1889 again brought little success. Sometime later, and before most other workers, navvies did win the boon, stressing extreme heat as justification. The shorter day was easier to apply to navvies than to builders' labourers who had to keep working at least as long as the tradesmen they assisted.[29]

Gold

The balance of class forces shifted during 1891 with the gold discoveries around Southern Cross, 350 km east of Perth, before richer loads further east at Coolgardie set off a demand for public works along the coast. The local elite outlaid a fortune on the remodeling of Fremantle Harbour to ensure that a vaster tribute from the goldfields passed through Perth rather than Esperance, the development of which might have helped the mining districts to secede. Within eight years, the population in the West almost quadrupled to 180,000, multiplying the demand for labourers on buildings. A rail link from Northam to the fields by late 1896 had required more navvies than builders' labourers before they returned to the coast, along with miners defeated by disease and the lack of water. The gold rushes initiated a building boom in Perth and to a lesser extent at Fremantle as housing estates opened and contracts were let for hotels, banks and public buildings.[30] The colony had twelve architects in 1893 but 102 by 1897.[31] Extensive construction in Flemish bond turned the inner city into a brick capital of the world.[32]

The prospect of striking it lucky freed workers from the worst of their fears of losing their places if they took action on the job. This combination of a demand for labour with an escape hatch to the goldfields helped the building unions to make an eight-hour day their standard by the end of 1892.[33]

Gaining strength

A Trades and Labour Council (TLC) began in October 1891, mostly from the building unions, including the United Labourers, which laid down wages for all grades, such as a

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arrived from the East during February (vol. IV, p. 2077), on which see below; for an assessment of Coghlan see E C Fry, '*Labour and Industry in Australia*', *Historical Studies*, 14 (55), October 1970, pp. 430-39.

[28] Coghlan, *Labour and Industry in Australia*, III, p. 1570.

[29] Coghlan, *Labour and Industry in Australia*, III, p. 1574.

[30] When Fenian Michael Davitt visited in 1895, he found Perth unsanitary with no buildings of note, and where 'capitalism rules the roost so far', *Life and Progress in Australasia*, Methuen, London, 1898, pp. 23-26. 'Proletaire' agreed: "Summing the colony up as a whole, it may be termed the LAST REFUGE OF CAPITALISM in Australia, and until the franchise is extended on a democratic basis, the exploiter will flourish like a bay tree …', *Socialist*, 11 July 1896, p. 4.

[31] J M Freeland, *The Making of a Profession, A history of the Growth and Work of the Architectural Institute in Australia*, A&R, Sydney, 1971, chapter 6; Ray and John Oldham, *George Temple-Poole, architect of the golden years, 1885-1897*, UWA Press, Nedlands, 1980.

[32] Ray Oldham, *Western heritage: a study of the colonial architecture of Perth, Western Australia*, Paterson Brokensha, Perth, c. 1980, pp. 41-80 and 89-90; *Heritage of Australia*, Macmillan, South Melbourne, 1981, pp. 6/29ff.

The prejudice of bourgeois historians shows in the failure of Margaret Pitt-Morrison and John White, writing on 'Builders and Buildings', to lift their sights beyond architects and businessmen, few of whom ever laid a brick, let alone raised a building, C T Stannage (ed.), *A New History of Western Australia*, University of Western Australia Press, Nedlands, 1981, pp. 511-50.

[33] Coghlan, *Labour and Industry in Australia*, III, p. 1575.

minimum of a shilling an hour for labourers. Living costs were between a third and a half higher than in Adelaide, Melbourne or Sydney, but this expense was balanced, to some extent, by the greater probability of getting a full week's wage every week than back East. The demand for labour was soon so great that higher rates were achieved without requiring more activism than the men's failure to return at the completion of the week's contract. After winning an eight-hour day in June 1891, the ASC&J secured ten shillings a day by holding out for only a week in December. In 1893, the Carpenters warded off an attempt to cut the rate back to nine. The TLC approached the Master Builders who refused to discuss as a group, though several employers did deals.[34]

Despite the emergence of unions, some of their activities were illegal under the Masters and Servants Acts, with two strikers gaoled in 1885 over the struggle for eight-hours.[35] The Carpenters lost the doubtful protection under the Friendly Societies Act, when the 1894 amendments excluded trade unions. As late as 1900, a union secretary was convicted under an anti-Jacobin law from the 1820s. Next year, that Act was repealed and a Conciliation and Arbitration Act passed.[36]

Pen sketches

Pen sketches of five newcomers illustrate the range of types who joined the colony's building industry along with Mellor.[37] At the start of the first stoppage, a pseudonymous newcomer. 'Proletaire' voiced the common view that the locals

> are as a rule 'too slow for a funeral', and are being constantly displaced by more energetic men from the eastern colonies. This naturally creates intense hatred of 't'other siders' … This jealousy will be played off in future against the workers as a body.[38]

The only mark of that deadly sin during the 1897 dispute was defeat under the leadership of the new arrivals.

The English-born Charles Henry Oldham **(**1863-unknown**)** immigrated to Victoria before moving to the West in 1892 as a carpenter. Within a year, he was president of the coastal Trades and Labour Council. Despite his becoming an employer in 1894, the TLC congratulated him on his election to the Assembly from May 1897;[39] in the days before

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[34] Coghlan, *Labour and Industry in Australia*, III, pp. 1573-6; Norman Dufty, 'Industrial Relations', Peter Firkus (ed.), *A History of Commerce and Industry in Western Australia*, UWA Press, Nedlands, 1979, pp. 176-7; I H Vanden Driesen, 'Evolution of the Trade Union Movement', Stannage (ed.), *A New History of Western Australia*, pp. 362-3; for a class analysis of these interpretations see Warrick Claydon, 'Labour Legislation in Western Australia 1892-1902: Its Historical and Ideological Perspectives', *Papers in Labour History*, 1, 1988, pp. 43-52; Bobbie Oliver, *Unity is strength: a history of the Australian Labor Party and the Trades and Labor Council in Western Australia, 1899-1999*, API Network, Perth, 2003, pp. 1-7.

[35] F Crowley, 'Master and Servant in Western Australia', *Journal and Proceedings, Western Australia Historical Society*, IV (VI), 1954, p. 29.

[36] Gibbney, Thesis, pp. 140-43. The prosecution happened under the premiership of John Forrest whose support had given the numbers to write the industrial relations power [Section 51 (xxxv)] into the Commonwealth Constitution, J A La Nauze, *The Making of the Australian Constitution*, MUP, Carlton, 1972, pp. 207-8.

[37] For others see Gibbney, *Labor in Politics*, pp. 346-7. ASC&J secretary Diver deserves more attention.

[38] *Socialist*, 11 July 1896, p. 4.

[39] Geoffrey Bolton and Ann Mozley (eds), *Western Australia Legislature 1870-1930, Biographical Notes*, ANU, Canberra, 1961, p. 145; David Black and Geoffrey Bolton, *Biographical Register of the Members of Parliament Western Australia, 1870-1930*, Parliament of Western Australia, Perth, 2001, p. 155; *WA*, 21 May 1897, p. 5.

payment of members, a wage-slave could not afford to attend to his parliamentary duties. Oldham's career is a reminder that skill barriers were far from fixed, fluctuating with the cycles in the building trade, with the seasons, and from year to year as labourers became tradesmen, and even contractors, while tradesmen took turns at labouring, indeed, working as navvies to put food on the table.[40]

After the carpenter George Pearce (1870-1952) arrived from Adelaide in April 1892, he chaired the meeting to revive a TLC in December. He failed at prospecting during 1894 before resuming his trade in Perth, to become president of the ASC&J. During the 1897 dispute, he was foreman in a joinery shop, a status and a workplace which put some distance between him and his members on site.[41]

Montague (Monty) Miller (1839-1920) came from Melbourne early in 1896, with his son who was also a carpenter. Miller senior claimed to have been present as a lad at Eureka in 1854; sixty-two years later, aged around seventy-seven, he was convicted of sedition for his support of the Industrial Workers of the World and their direct action in opposition to the imperialist war and all forms of conscription.[42] As an advocate of all-grades New Unionism, Miller was happy to associate with labourers and navvies. Neither father nor son belonged to a union in 1897, but Monty was accepted by the unions as spokesperson for a large number of non-union carpenters whose lack of apprenticed training made them ineligible to join the ASC&J.[43]

Last to arrive, the bricklayer Martin Hannah (1865-1953) came from Melbourne with his labourer brother Henry, a few days before the 1897 dispute started. A week later, Martin lost his place for showing sympathy for the unions. Returning east, he became secretary of Victorian Bricklayers and of all the building trades during their 1906-7 dispute, and then Labour member of the Assembly for Collingwood**.**[44] Henry was founding secretary of the Australian Builders' Labourers' Federation in 1910. The brothers embodied the persistence needed to create and maintain organisations.[45]

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[40] See my 'Improvising Nomads', *Journal of Australian Colonial History* (*JACH*), 10 (2), 2008, pp. 238-43.

[41] George Pearce, *Carpenter to Cabinet*, Hutchinson, London, 1951; Peter Heydon, *Quiet Decision, A Study of George Foster Pearce*, MUP, Carlton, 1965. He served as Senator from 1901 to 1937, often as Minister for Defence, leaving the Labor Party in 1916 over conscription for overseas service.

[42] Eric Fry, 'Australian Worker, Monty Miller', Eric Fry (ed.), *Rebels and Radicals*, George Allen & Unwin Australia, North Sydney, 1983, pp. 178-193; Vic Williams (ed.), *Eureka and beyond: Monty Miller, his own story*, Lone Hand Press, Willagee, 1988; Monty Miller, *Labor's Road to Freedom*, Andrade's Bookshop, Melbourne, 1920.

[43] *WA*, 8 February 1897, p. 2; *Bulletin*, 24 June 1882, p. 1. The Progressive Society of Carpenters and Joiners, formed in the 1850s, was smaller and less exclusive than the ASC&J, John Shields, 'Skill Reclaimed: Craft Work, Craft Unions and the Survival of Apprenticeship in NSW, 1860-1914', PhD Thesis, University of Sydney, 1990, p. 86.

[44] *WA*, 10 February 1897, p. 3, 12 February, p. 6, 13 February, p. 5, 15 February, p. 3, 29 March 1897, p. 4; G Browne, *Biographical Register of the Victorian Parliament, 1901-1984*, Victorian Government Printing Office, Melbourne, 1985, p. 90.

[45] Transcript of the 1913 Award Hearings in the Commonwealth Conciliation and Arbitration Court, Australian Builders' Labourers' Federation v A W Archer, B 1958 (B/1958) 9/1912, pp. 72 and 132; *Builders' Labourers' News* (Melb.), 12 May 1916, p. 2.

A third brother, Robert, had been secretary of the South Australian Bricklayers and the first secretary of the colony's United Trades and Labor Council in 1884, before being killed on a Melbourne job on 14 August 1894, *Argus*, 16 August 1894, p. 6; *Advertiser* (Adelaide), 29 August 1894, p. 5; *Building*

Builders' Labourers' Society

No sooner had builders' labourers formed a union late in 1891 than they demanded eight shillings for an eight-hour day. Without support from the TLC, they had to backdown.[46] In the wake of this reverse, they regrouped as the Builders' Labourers' Society (BLS) on 9 March 1893.[47] The death of one of their number on a Fremantle brewery five days before encouraged the roll-up.[48] At year's end, their union again was almost defunct because of sub-contracting.[49] Hence, the BLS had to be revived from September 1895 with C Martin was secretary and D Clyde as president.[50] Within a year, a branch had been established at Fremantle where the labourers met weekly in the London Hotel, and most got nine shillings a day.[51]

On 30 June 1896, the BLS insisted on nine shillings as the daily rate to take effect four weeks later.[52] After the employers refused the tradesmen eleven shillings, the two unions met on 1 August. The secretary of the newly reformed Builders and Contractors' Association (B&CA), Mr Cohen, attended to seek peace but only three employers turned up at the negotiations. The BLs struck a week later.[53] By the middle of the month, all 'reputable' employers were paying the higher rate for an eight-hour day. The only hold-out had two government contracts. Union officials reported that 'utmost good feeling prevailed between employers and employees'.[54]

The Perth labourers gathered in Jacoby's Café de Paris for seven newcomers to be welcomed by the 130 present in mid-August 1896. Next month, the annual meeting elected Mellor as president. On the eve of the eight-hour day celebration in October, 150 turned up to initiate eighteen applicants, with ten more signing on a fortnight later.[55] The BLS grew by taking up the everyday demands of its members, for instance, pressing for trains to run at the times needed to get the men to and from work.[56] The Society also

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and Engineering Journal (*BEJ*), 1 September 1894, p. 64. South Australian premier C C Kingston contributed to the relief fund for Hannah's widow, *Argus*, 28 August, 1894, p. 4.

[46] Gibbney, Thesis, p. 65.

[47] *WA*, 11 March 1893, p. 4.

[48] *WA*, 13 March 1893, p. 2; even the indefatigable Gibbney did not identify the inaugural office bearers.

[49] *WA*, 13 June 1893, p. 6.

[50] *WA*, 25 September 1895, p. 4, 7 November 1895, p. 4, 23 September 1896, p. 4.

[51] *WA*, 17 July 1896, p. 4, 30 July 1896, p. 4.

[52] *WA*, 2 July 1896, p. 4, 4 July 1896, p. 5, 1 April 1897, p. 4.

[53] *MH*, 30 January 1897, p. 15, 1 February 1897, p. 4.

[54] *WA*, 17 August 1896, p. 5.

[55] *WA*, 17 August 1896, p. 5, 23 September, p. 4, 21 October, p. 5, 4 November 1896, p. 4.

[56] *WA*, 4 July 1896, p. 5.

called for a scaffolding inspector,[57] and a lien bill to deal with contractors who absconded without paying wages.[58]

PART III – The wages push

The costs of living

The prices of the commodities needed to reproduce labour power continued to increase, spurring workers to lift their wages. Some blamed import duties for their higher costs; others pointed to price-gouging by bakers.[59] In July 1896, 'Proletaire' warned his Sydney comrades that Perth was 'a veritable paradise for the landlord. Rents are exorbitantly high, a pound per week for three miserable rooms, and you have to pay as much as a five pound bonus to be allowed this privilege'.[60] Two months later, Plasterers' secretary Herbert Bush thought that Perth was fifty percent more expensive than the eastern capitals, with four rooms costing as much as thirty shillings, on top of a ten pound deposit.[61] When 300 carpenters met in the Oddfellows Hall on 22 January 1897, they reported that rent took up half their wages. Their secretary, W J Diver, thought they needed two shillings a day more, but felt that such a rate was beyond their employers. Miller's call for thirteen shillings and four pence attracted only five votes after he gave 'the horrors of hard necessity' back East as grounds for being content with twelve shillings.[62]

When Mellor wrote to newspapers in the East cautioning labourers against taking ship to the West because of reports of nine shillings a day, he added that conditions were harsher. For instance, few dwellings had reticulated water. Paying for each gallon added to the cost of living and reinforced the wage demands. Another union official warned of 'flies and black sand'.[63] Industrial and environmental discontents interlocked for the 1897 dispute.[64] The B&CA secretary, Mr Fred Groome, claimed that labourers had been

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[57] *WA*, 7 October 1896, p. 4. A line from Fremantle through Perth to Guilford had opened to passengers in 1881.

Six weeks before Mellor's death, the Under-Secretary wrote to the TLC to say that the Crown Law offices had advised that the appointment of an inspector would be useless, that such a person would be trespassing and without the power to prosecute. Since these problems could be overcome only by legislation, the authorities promised to 'bear the matter in mind and consider what steps, if any, can be advantageously taken, whenever the opportunity may offer', *WA*, 23 April 1897, p. 6. The government did not appoint its own scaffolding inspectors until 1924, see my *Framework of Flesh, Builders' labourers battle for health and safety*, Ginninderra, Port Adelaide, 2009, pp. 41-42.

[58] *MH*, 29 January 1897, p. 5. A Lien Act came in 1898.

[59] *MH*, 15 February 1897, p. 9.

[60] *Socialist*, 11 July 1896, p. 4. The writer noted that workers were rushing to pay 'inflated prices for pocket-handkerchief allotments in order to avoid paying the exorbitant rents and they talk of MY land with as much "bumptiousness" as they did in Melbourne and Sydney during the boom'. The author might have been Mellor who is mentioned on the front page of the issue as corresponding with the paper.

[61] *Australian Workman*, 3 October 1896, p. 2; George Waite, later secretary of the United Labourers' Protective Society in NSW, gave the same advice about the goldfields, 24 October 1896, p. 3; Waite's papers and those of the ULPS are in the Mitchell Library,

[62] *MH*, 23 January 1897, p. 5.

[63] *Australian Workman*, 3 October 1896, p. 2.

[64] *WA*, 18 February 1897, p. 10; *BEJ*, 20 February 1897, p. 39.

content with four shillings for beer but now wanted ten shillings to buy whiskey.[65] Groome's belief in 'the labourer['s] being happy with his five shillings a day and a bottle of beer'[66] was confirmed in part by consumption levels, which were high even allowing for the predominance of males in the population. The first year for which statistics are reliable, 1899, recorded an average of twenty-four gallons for every settler, twice the volumes in Victoria.[67] Beer was attractive since water was almost as costly, often as hard to obtain and likely to prove deadly.

Water

Just as Mr Peel on arriving at Swan River in 1829 had been 'left without a servant to … fetch him water from the river',[68] many Perth residents during the 1890s could not get water for their daily needs. For as long as Perth had been a scatter of settlements, its residents had been able to meet their requirements out of wells powered by windmills. A private company supplied water to the city until the establishment of a Metropolitan Water Board from 1896, after which the City Council complained that its officers no longer had the right to inspect the catchments, so that a dead cow had polluted the reservoir, increasing the risk of fevers.[69] Other improvements ran late, or failed. For example, one North Perth resident protested that, although water rarely ran through his pipes, the meters measuring its flow never stopped ticking over.[70] Tent dwellers had paid two shillings and sixpence to have water connected to their camp sites but with no result,[71] which doubly disadvantaged single labourers who were the most likely to be under canvas.

Water was a further instance of unequal distribution. On one January day in 1897, 195 users took two-sevenths of the supply from carts.[72] Delivery north of Wellington Street sometimes did not start until midnight, provoking locals to stone the carts when they did turn up, frustrated at being served last and inadequately. The carts lacked hoses to reach inside dwellings to fill tubs or baths, and few householders could afford enough large utensils to fill up out on the street.[73] With no water waiting for them at home, outdoor workers could not re-hydrate for the following day, still less wash their dirty and sweat-incrusted clothes, or afford the Chinese laundries.[74]

The want of water was a graver problem for navvies because they had no supply on sites until after their excavations. In warning labourers in the East against being attracted by reports of higher wages, BLS secretary Mellor noted that, even in the established areas, his members had to seek water from neighbours with wells, a problem

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[65] *MH*, 15 January 1897, the page number is not available because that issue no longer exists, but we know the date of the interview from a letter in reponse.
[66] Paraphrased by Mellor, *WA*, 8 February 1897, p. 2.
[67] Suzanne Welborn, *Swan, The History of a Brewery*, UWAP, Nedlands, 1987, pp. 72-74 and 85.
[68] M F Lloyd Prichard, (ed.), *The Collected Works of Edward Gibbon Wakefield*, Collins, London, 1968, pp. 289, 524-5 and 554; Karl Marx, *Capital*, volume I, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1976, pp. 932-3.
[69] *WA*, 26 February 1897, p. 2; *MH*, 16 February 1897, p. 7.
[70] Letter *WA*, 14 January 1897, p. 5, 'Editorial', 20 February 1897, pp. 4-5.
[71] *WA*, 27 February 1897, p. 2.
[72] C T Stannage, *People of Perth*, University of West Australia Press, Nedlands, 1979, p. 275.
[73] *WA*, 13 January 1897, p. 5, 14 January 1897, p. 5, 'Letter', 19 January 1897, p. 5, 'Editorial', 20 February 1897, p. 4.
[74] *WA*, 13 January 1897, p. 5, 'Letter', 14 January 1895, p. 5.

made worse on days when temperatures soared.[75] Perth endures scorching summers with scarcely a drop of rain, relieved only if an afternoon sea breeze – 'the Fremantle doctor' - reaches the city. As the mercury went from 38 to 41°C in mid-January, the city feared a repeat of the 1896 summer, one of the hottest on record. The first day of the strike was a mere 25°C but, by Thursday, the temperature had risen to 40°C, and rarely went below 32° while the BLs were in dispute, frequently nudging a century of the Fahrenheit scale.[76]

Dunghills

Lack of water was not the worst of it. Although no builders' labourer in Perth died of thirst, few avoided dehydration or dysentery. During the fortnight that the dispute ran, three-quarters of the 137 patients in Perth hospital were suffering from typhoid.[77] The city's Medical Officer was responsible for both water and sewerage but had little control over either. Governments resisted deep sewers because of their cost so that Perth was 'living on a dunghill', its backyard wells polluted by sanitary waste seeping from cesspits. Earth closets served the well-to-do. Typhoid mortality rose from seventy in 1895 to eighty-nine in 1896, before peaking in 1897 at 134 fatalities out of 1,408 cases.[78] On the goldfields, hundreds of miners died from water-borne diseases; the lack of potable water there forced hundreds more back to Perth early in 1897, compounding its water and sewerage problems.[79] The population increase added to the over-crowding in the worst served districts. Fears that the cramped living conditions of the Chinese were a source of typhoid inflamed the racism around economic competition.[80]

Disease affected the conduct of the dispute since both Pearce and Mellor were off sick during its final week. Mellor's home was on the odourous path to the Sanitary Depot. Pearce could not chair the ASC&J meeting on Saturday afternoon, 6 February.[81] Mellor was out of action three days later and so had been unable to arrange for the mass meeting as the strike was the edge of collapse.[82]

PART IV – The second bout

Gathering pace

On 29 September 1896, the BLS had determined to work for not less than ten shillings a day and for no longer than eight hours. They said they would strike if the extra shilling were not paid from 1 February 1897. The Society gave four months' notice because contracts had been accepted at the existing rates. Its officials were confident that the employers would give way because many experienced labourers already were getting the

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[75] *WA*, 18 February 1897, p. 10.
[76] *WA*, 14 January 1897, p. 3.
[77] *WA*, 6 February 1897, p. 5, 13 February 1897, p. 5; *MH*, 17 February 1897, p. 5.
[78] Stannage, *People of Perth*, p. 278; Su-Joan Hunt and Geoffrey Bolton, 'Cleansing the Dunghill: Water Supply and Sanitation in Perth 1878-1912', *Studies in Western Australian History*, II, March 1978, pp. 1-17.
[79] 'Letter', *WA*, 7 January 1897, p. 6.
[80] *WA*, 26 February 1897, p. 2. Anne Atkinson, 'Perth's Chinese Laundry Workers, 1900-1920, and the Effect of the Factories Act of 1904', *Time Remembered*, 5, 1982, pp. 64-83.
[81] *WA*, 6 February 1897, p. 2.
[82] *WA*, 23 January 1897, p. 10, 26 January 1897, p. 6.

higher rate.[83] During October, Mellor led the BLS in setting up a committee to campaign for a Board of Arbitration to prevent strikes, a move allied to his call at the Building Trades' Council for greater industrial strength.[84]

The BLS campaign was part of a swell of activism with the boom. The Operative Painters and Decorators' Union and the Plumbers and Gasfitters Union were both established by August.[85] During September, the Carpenters won a further increase to eleven shillings,[86] as did Plasterers and Bricklayers.[87] In November, the labourers who carried sanitary pans asked the City Council for ten shillings a day but, with no organisation, their action collapsed.[88]

After a workplace injury incapacitated BLS secretary Martin, Mellor took his place *pro tem* from December 1896, with Thomas Joyce acting as president.[89] The officials around Mellor knew that their Society was in its infancy, with four non-unionists in the industry for every member. Hence, the BLS called non-members to a meeting at Jacoby's on 12 January 1897. Sixty enrolled on the spot, several signing on because the strong stand taken by the Society in July-August had forced the employers to concede the nine shillings. With British investments flowing in, Mellor expected 'no difficulty' in making the higher rate universal. This assessment encouraged the men to think that the employers' refusal was a 'bluff'.[90]

The TLC had been represented at the BLS meeting on 30 June 1896 at which the labourers insisted on nine shillings.[91] When Mellor and his supporters asked the TLC to involve itself in the next dispute, its secretary, Underwood, declined on the grounds that the Council could not take up particular struggles.[92] Carpenters' secretary Diver thought it appropriate that the TLC remain 'perfectly neutral'. [93] Two weeks later, in offering full support for the strikers, the new president (W J Kensitt, from the Furniture Trades) overlooked this excuse when he regretted the tardiness with which the building unions had approached the Council.[94]

Shaping up

Just before the New Year, the BLS re-asserted its claim for one shilling and threepence an hour for all labourers, justifying the higher rates and the eight-hours by the heat.[95] Despite the announced starting date of February 1, four labourers quit their jobs on 15

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[83] *WA*, 23 September 1896, p. 4.
[84] *WA*, 7 October 1896, p. 4; the meeting also commissioned a new banner for the Eight-Hour Day procession when 100 marched.
[85] *WA*, 17 August 1896, p 5.
[86] *WA*, 2 February 1897, p. 3.
[87] *MH*, 29 January 1897, p. 5; *WA*, 17 August 1896, p. 5.
[88] Stannage, *People of Perth*, p. 278. The sanitary workers organised themselves enough to donate £2 4s 6d to Mellor Relief Fund, *WA*, 5 February 1898, p. 1.
[89] *WA*, 1 January 1897, p. 5, 13 January 1897, p. 5.
[90] *WA*, 13 January 1897, p. 5.
[91] *WA*, 2 July 1896, p. 4.
[92] *WA*, 29 January 1897, p. 2; the BLS and the TLC had disagreed with the latter's proposal to make its secretary Underwood the secretary of the Eight-Hour Committee, *WA*, 29 January 1897, p. 5.
[93] *WA*, 2 February 1897, p. 3.
[94] *WA*, 12 February 1897, p. 6.
[95] *WA*, 13 January, p. 5; *MH*, 27 January 1897, p. 2. The press did not report the BLS December meeting at the time.

January and many more before the end of the month.[96] On the eve of the stoppage, newspaper interviews with labourers revealed both broad support for united action and some disaffection. Many were getting the ten shillings and almost all agreed that the rate should be universal. Single men were less emphatic. All the union members, whether married or 'unencumbered', justified their taking advantage of the boom: 'The contractors benefit by the prosperity of Western Australia, and why shouldn't we?'[97] BLS delegate to the TLC, C A Ellis, thought that the labourers would not strike because they needed their wages to exist, but he also expected the employers to cave in.[98]

Behind these nuances was the pressure on those who had crossed to the 'golden West' to support the families they had left behind. A man who had earned only five shillings a day in South Melbourne said he was no better off on nine shillings in Perth after he sent home all but one pound. Several declared they would rather return East than continue on nine shillings.[99] At the start of the strike, another recalled that even the lower wages in Melbourne did not compel them 'to live with our families in one room, where if you swing a cat round you will knock out its brains'.[100] A labourer explained why he needed more than B&CA secretary Groome's notion of a 'humpy' and a 'ration' for the natives:

> The labourious nature of the work is such that it tends to shorten life, and, as my labor is my capital, I must allow for the wear and tear of my system in the same manner as a contractor would the wear and tear of machinery.[101]

As ASC&J secretary Diver put it: 'The conditions of living in Perth are not particularly good, and the men should have some inducement to remain here if they are to sacrifice home comforts'.[102]

The men turned indignant at the failure of the employers to reply to the BLS letter, looking upon the silence from the Contractors' Association as 'tantamount to a refusal'. Nonetheless, few expected to have to stop earning in order to win.[103] Most had faith in the law of supply and demand, believing that the employers could never obtain enough workers at the lower rates. Diver underpinned this conviction by pointing to the unbroken record of union victories since 1891. He thought that the matter would be settled within a week, which was less hope-filled than those of his members who said it would be over in 'two days'.[104]

At the regular BLS meeting on Tuesday, 26 January, Mellor read correspondence from labourers' unions in the eastern colonies reassuring the West that there was no chance of 'skilled labourers' being attracted by nine shillings. In addition, the Fremantle men had written to say that they stood ready to join the struggle. Thirty labourers signed up that evening. Most members were already getting the ten shillings. To make that rate universal, they voted 'to withdraw all union men … not in receipt of ten shillings per day, after a friendly interview' with individual employers. To prepare for any emergency, the

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[96] *MH*, 16 January 1897, p. 7, 2 February 1897, p. 4.
[97] *WA*, 28 January 1897, p. 2.
[98] *MH*, 30 January 1897, p. 15.
[99] *WA*, 28 January 1897, p. 2.
[100] *WA*, 2 February 1897, p. 3.
[101] *MH*, 27 January 1897, p. 2.
[102] *WA*, 2 February 1897, p. 3.
[103] *WA*, 28 January 1897, p. 2.
[104] *MH*, 1 February 1897, p. 4.

BLs appointed a strike committee and collected funds. The Society announced a public meeting on the Esplanade for Saturday to hear reports and called for a Special meeting in a week's time.[105]

Before the Special, the collapse of a four-storey wall reminded all building workers of the risks they faced. Operations on that hotel site were proceeding because the owner, acting as his own contractor, had agreed to pay the higher rates.[106] The workmen were fortunate that the structure had begun to crack two hours before it tumbled into Wellington Street. The city engineer and several councilors acknowledged that jobs were not inspected to ensure that they were being erected in accordance with the plans on which they had been approved. Enforcement of the Building Act remained 'urgent' for a further twenty-seven years before the appointment of government inspectors. Municipal control meant no control.[107]

Carpenters

The labourers' initiative encouraged a body of the carpenters on Saturday night, 23 January, to insist on a minimum of twelve shillings from Monday, 1 February.[108] Seven years after the event, the then president of the ASC&J, [Senator] George Pearce, recalled the circumstances of that decision. In response to 'a petition from non-unionists', he had convened a meeting at which the outsiders outnumbered his members by two to one:

> When it commenced a non-unionist [Monty Miller?], rose and proposed that we should ask for a certain wage. He made a most eloquent speech, and created a great impression amongst the men. I could see that, with the exception of perhaps a few unionists, his proposition would be carried unanimously. Speaking from the chair, I appealed to the meeting to pause. I pointed out, first, that we ought to give notice, because a number of big contracts had been taken in hand under a lower rate, and, secondly, that we should probably be defeated, and that therefore we ought to ask for a lower increase than was proposed. But so strong an impression was made by the non-unionist who moved the motion that it was carried.

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[105] *WA*, 29 January 1897, p. 5.

This account of the dispute relies on the *West Australian*, which, although not friendly towards organised labour, adhered to the principle of reporting all sides of the dispute without editorialising its news columns. Its tone is epitomised in this passage: 'During his speech, Mr Miller was frequently interrupted by applause, which was saved from monotonousness by the occasional cries of dissatisfaction which punctuated his address', 15 February 1897, p. 3.

Mellor told a mass meeting that 'they could not expect anything like justice from those who ran the newspapers in Perth. The *West Australian*, however, had treated them much better than the other morning paper [*Morning Herald*], which was supposed to be run in the interests of democracy … it was time for the workers to run a paper of their own', *WA*, 8 February 1897, p. 2; the bricklayer Martin Hannah called on the TLC to establish a labour paper, *WA*, 12 February 1897, p. 6; next year, the TLC leased the back page of the *Sunday Chronicle*, J H Gibbney, *Labor in Print*, Australian National University, Canberra, 1975, item 388; the 1899 Trades Union and Labor Congress at Coolgardie debated the establishment of a labour paper as it welcomed the editor of the *Kalgoorlie Miner*, John Kirwan, for his 'valuable services to the cause of Democracy', p. 16; the labour vote returned Kirwan for Kalgoorlie in 1901, but defeated him in 1903. A pro-labour paper, *The People*, had failed in 1892 because of conflicts between the Lumpers' Union in Fremantle and the TLC in Perth, Gibbney, Thesis, pp. 17 and 85-88.

[106] *WA*, 2 February 1897, p. 3.

[107] *WA*, 3 February 1897, p. 5; see *Framework of Flesh*, chapters 1 and 2.

[108] *WA*, 28 January 1897, p. 2.

Pearce claimed that he 'loyally carried out its direction'.[109] The extent to which his expectation of defeat made this loyalty less than enthusiastic remains debatable.

A week later, on the Saturday before the official starting day, 1 February, some 400 carpenters were either on strike or had been locked out.[110] The ASC&J officials offered to accept a daily rate of eleven shillings if the employers made it universal. The employers refused in the expectation that workmen would flood into the colony and depress wages.[111] One contractor told a reporter that carpenters in Victoria were accepting two shillings sixpence a day, with an average of six shillings.[112]

The Masters

The concessions forced on the employers' during August and September left them determined to resist. Contractors had paid once and were resolved to pay no more, in part, for fear of encouraging further demands. A prominent employer admitted that they had been so poorly organised in August that many had given in rather than risk disruption.[113] Another added that uncertainty was at least as great a threat as a higher wage. Tenders were lodged at one price for labour, only to find profits being absorbed by unanticipated costs. Whatever solution was found, the employers had to put a stop to the being 'a target at which the workman may shoot whenever he feels so disposed'.[114] Indeed, surges in the price of materials and labour had been so common that contracts already included *force majeur* clauses to release builders from penalties for running late or over their estimates. From Melbourne, the *Building and Engineering Journal* had voiced concern in October that builders in the West might provoke an industrial dispute to avoid the penalties from falling behind schedule.[115]

Like their labourers, the Master Builders twice failed to set up an association between 1887 and their coming together in May 1896.[116] The relative strengths of the classes were being transformed by the appearance of an employers' organisation to resist this 'bushranging', and with a fighting fund of £500. A spokesperson expected the strike to collapse before the weekend. If not, the employers would import men from the East. In Fremantle, some Masters spoke of responding with a 'lock-out'.[117]

In protecting their pockets, the employers drew on experience from dealing with the strikes in the eastern colonies up to 1894. Step one was to form a fighting force of their own. The B&CA set up a Defence Association to defeat the new demands. Some

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[109] *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates* (*CPD*), v. 22, 26 October 1904, p. 6053; John Merritt, 'George Foster Pearce and the Perth Building Trades Strike of 1897', *Bulletin of the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History*, 3, November 1962, pp. 3-22; Merritt defends Pearce's strategy without noting the Friday night meeting, still less his absence.

[110] *MH*, 1 February 1897, p. 4, 2 February 1897, p. 4.

[111] *WA*, 2 February 1897, p. 3.

[112] *WA*, 28 January 1897, p. 2. For conditions in Melbourne see *Australasian Builders' and Contractors' News*, 18 February 1893, p. 64; Henry Hannah wrote up his experience, *Builders' Labourers' News*, 12 May 1916, p. 3.

[113] *WA*, 28 January 1897, p. 2; *MH*, 28 January 1897, p. 6.

[114] *WA*, 2 February 1897, p. 3.

[115] *BEJ*, 24 October 1896, p. 325.

[116] Freeland, *The Making of a Profession*, pp. 116-18; for pen sketches of a slightly later cohort of contractors see J S Battye, *Cyclopedia of Western Australia*, volume I, Cyclopedia Company, Adelaide, 1912, pp. 648-60.

[117] *WA*, 28 January 1897, p. 2; *MH*, 27 January 1897, p. 2.

thirty-five employers met, in camera, on 27 January in the offices of B&CA secretary Groome. The need for a separate body arose from a division within the B&CA over the willingness to pay the higher rates, with as many as fifteen being prepared to concede.[118] Only twenty-eight of the forty-one employers agreed to levy themselves £10 each to import 'free labour'. All held back until they saw whether the men did stop on Monday, 1 February.[119]

Once the battle lines were drawn on the jobs, the Contractors regrouped, turning its Defence Association into a phalanx as the Employers' Association with the president of the B&CA, Mr Deague, at its head.[120]. The new Association announced arrangements with the Builders' and Contractors' Associations in Melbourne and Sydney to recruit seventy-five men from each city.[121] After the Employers' Association first meeting, its representatives drove around the city urging their fellows to hold out. When the Perth officers called Fremantle builders and contractors together that evening, the seventeen locals resolved to resist the unions and to back the new Association.[122] The Carpenters' secretary, Diver, was naïve enough to welcome the Defence Association because it meant dealing with one opponent and not forty.[123]

The employers continued to conduct their deliberations *in camera*, releasing press statements rarely, though a journalist on the *West Australian* secured what we would now refer to as inspired leaks. By contrast, the workers held most of their discussions on the Esplanade. This tactical, even strategic advantage for the employers came through what the *West Australian* called their 'policy of silence' and was easier to sustain among fifty-six Masters than some 3,000 workmen.[124] The Plasterers moved their meeting on 13 February to inside Jacoby's from the Esplanade 'as they did not deem it wise to have the discussions published'.[125]

Faced with even a partial withdrawal of labour from February 1, the employers strengthened their organisation. Their Monday afternoon meeting in St George's Hall confirmed the transformation of the Defence Association into a permanent Employers' Association to take over from the B&CA. Membership had grown from forty to fifty-six, including the Timber Merchants' Association. Some Masters had succeeded in pushing wages for labourers on some sites down from ten to nine shillings.[126]

Because contractors relied on architects to manage their projects, the two groups had conferred in September on how to deal with the threat of a second stoppage, meeting again just before the strike started.[127] The architects had not been organised until May

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[118] *WA*, 1 February 1897, p. 5.
[119] *WA*, 28 January 1897, p. 2.
[120] *WA*, 2 February 1897, p. 3. In March, Deague represented the Employers' Association on a delegation to the Director of Public Works to oppose day labour, *WA*, 4 March 1898, p. 7.
[121] *WA*, 28 January 1897, p. 2.
[122] *WA*, 27 January 1897, p. 2; *MH*, 28 January 1897, p. 6.

In June, the Fremantle B&CA debated amalgamation with its counterpart in Perth, which was stronger financially, *WA*, 11 June 1897, p. 5.
[123] *MH*, 1 February 1897, p. 4.
[124] *WA*, 16 February 1897, p. 5; *MH*, 16 February 1897, p. 5.
[125] *WA*, 15 February 1897, p. 3.
[126] *WA*, 28 January 1897**,** p. 2, 13 February 1897, p. 5; *MH*, 29 January 1897, p. 5.
[127] *WA*, 23 September 1896, p. 4; *MH*, 1 February 1897, p. 4.

Experience at organising men and equipment led architects to commands in the First AIF in the imperialist war and to leadership of the Secret Armies in the class war. For Perth's Major-General Talbot

1896 when they established their Institute.[128] During February, some tried to use their supervision of works to prevent contractors from paying the higher rates.[129] One architect felt that twelve shillings was fair but the firms needed two months notice; another thought that the carpenters would succeed due to shortages of labour.[130] Diver wanted an architect to be on conciliation committee and to have the deciding vote.[131] With his keener understanding of the 'enemy', Mellor denounced an alliance between landowners, 'spurious' contractors and architects against the workers and the 'genuine' contractors.[132]

V. The fight is on

The test

Testing the resolve of each class began on Monday, 1 February, at 7.30 am, the regular time for the start of operations when labourers and carpenters asked their employers whether they would pay the increase. If they met with a refusal, they were supposed to withdraw. This method of proceeding indicated a triumph of optimism over tactics and of flexibility over strategy. Yet that combination was the best the unions could arrange.

Not only had the BLS failed to insist on a blanket withdrawal across the industry but allowed men who got the higher rates to keep working alongside those who had not. It was common practice for employers to pay more for men with experience or knacks. Instead of using those workers as leverage for the rest, the unions left the employers with the means to undermine the campaign. Even where all the labourers had struck, employers were able to bring in 'a few of the best labourers in order that the work would not be altogether stopped'. On the Stock Exchange building, the most skilled carpenters and labourers got the higher rate until the contractor heard what his foreman had done, whereupon he dismissed all the men, including the foreman. Confusion was twice confounded at the Bank of Australasia on St George's-terrace when a member of the Employers' Association paid the higher rate to the labourers but not to the carpenters.[133] Although such arrangements breached the unity of both classes, site-by-site settlements did more harm to the loosely organised unionists than among the Masters who were tightening the controls over their own kind.

When a reporter on the *West Australian* visited sites early on the Monday, he found that 'the usual noise and bustle incidental to building operation had greatly slackened'. The unionists gathered in knots discussing the likelihood of their demand's being met but soon realised that the employers were not bluffing. A number of non-

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Hobbs as Artillery Commander see Suzanne Welborn, *Lords of Death a people a place a legend*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Fremantle, 1982; in Sydney, there were Major-General Rosenthal, and George and Florence Taylor, see E K Teather, 'The Taylors, Sir Charles Rosenthal and Protofascism in the 1920s', in R Freestone (ed.), *The Australian Planner Proceedings of Planning History Conference*, School of Town Planning, University of New South Wales, 1993, pp. 102-11; E K Teather, 'Fascism in Australia: Town Planning Propagandists: Some Implications', *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, 40 (3), 1994, pp. 335-50.

[128] Freeland, *The Making of a Profession*, p. 117.

[129] *WA*, 9 February 1897, p. 5.

[130] *MH*, 29 January 1897, p. 5.

[131] *MH*, 30 January 1897, p. 15; *WA*, 2 February 1897, p. 3.

[132] *WA*, 8 February 1897, p. 2; four months later, the proposer of the toast to 'Architects' at Fremantle B&CA dinner criticised them for 'coercive clauses in the specifications', *WA*, 11 June 1897, p. 4.

[133] *WA*, 2 February 1897, p. 3.

unionists then went to work despite 'contemptuous remarks from the strikers' who hung about for hours. Only at the extensions to Baun's Palace Hotel in William Street was indignation voiced in 'impolite terms' such as 'You -------- scab, boo-hoo!' The reporter retreated from his inspection of one site where a 'burly striker' mistook him for 'another blanky hod-carrier looking for a job at nine bob a day'.[134]

The strikers were even more outraged by the sight of Italians labouring on public buildings for that lower rate.[135] After four were taken on, one dropped his hod and walked off but the others kept unloading bricks until dismissed because bricklayers and plasterers refused to work with 'coloured' labour, one hoddie identifying the Italians as Asiatics.[136] A contractor for public works replaced unionists with Italians on a lower rate of pay. Mellor called them 'Italian slaves', alleging that they

> were being imported into the colony with the express purpose of supplanting white labour. The gentleman responsible had agents who boarded and lodged these 'slaves' until they obtained work for them. Then, an arrangement was made whereby the agents drew a certain portion of their wages each month.

Mellor's report raised the prospect of the unions' rescuing the Italians. After all, on May Day, he had spoken in support of those struggling for reforms everywhere. Instead, the stonemasons walked off rather than 'work with alien labour'. Mellor understood what the bosses were up to but failed to follow through on his socialism to defend the Italians as doubly exploited.[137]

The *West Australian*'s reporter concluded that 'the majority' of carpenters and labourers had 'departed'. Although few other tradesmen were affected on the first day, a handful of plasterers and bricklayers had to be stood down because there were no hod-carriers to supply mortar and bricks. The plasterers accepted the situation because they had served notice of joining the action from the following Monday, 8 February. The bricklayers had just won the twelve-shilling rate so that '[h]ere and there one would see a single bricklayer loading his barrow and hauling it to the top and continuing his work'. Such 'dual capacity' was commonplace on smaller jobs at any time since any number of bricklayers were 'jumped-up' hod-carriers. Of the tradesmen, the carpenters were the most determined and united in their refusal to work for less than the twelve shillings as they squatted on the footpaths, 'their tools carefully packed up', waiting for their employers to yield.[138] When the Stonemasons met that night, they agreed to go after the increase - once the others had succeeded.[139]

The site-by-site approach by the unions allowed both sides to claim success at the close of that first day, with the reporter for the *West Australian* recalling that the wage dispute in August had generated opinion rather than fact. Late Monday, the Employers' Association declared that thirty-nine of the fifty-six firms it represented had suffered no stoppage upon denying the demand. A few men walked away from seventeen sites which nonetheless were able to continue. A reliable estimate was that 100 men had stopped

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[134] *WA*, 2 February 1897, p. 3.
[135] *WA*, 2 February 1897, p. 3.
[136] *MH*, 1 February 1897, p. 4, 2 February 1897, p. 5; for the Italian Settlers Colony, *WA*, 13 April 1895, p. 3.
[137] *WA*, 8 February 1897, p. 2.
[138] *WA*, 2 February 1897, p. 2; for instances of brickies working as their own hoddies, McQueen, 'Improving Nomads', *JACH*, 2008, p. 241.
[139] *WA*, 2 February 1897, p. 3.

while thirty jobs were still 'in full swing'. For their part, the unions pointed to twenty firms paying the higher rate. Diver acknowledged that only 200 of the 800 carpenters were getting the increase, though he himself had been taken on that morning for twelve shillings.[140]

Carpenters - Perth

When the carpenters met at 5.30 on the Esplanade, they were so confident that a holiday mood prevailed, the men joking, many in their best clothes. Pearce told them that the large number of strikers was proof that 'it needed no oratory to induce them to make up their minds on the question'. The officials relied on members to know who was paying the higher wage:

> A voice: Ten out of twelve of McAllum's men are working for 11s.
> Another: Pringle has given twelve shillings since Saturday. ('Good luck to him! He is a white man'. Laughter) Davy Gray has given twelve shillings. ('Put a white chalk up for that'. Laughter)

The officials collected the names of workmen who were continuing on the old wage so that they might be spoken with. The unions had yet to appoint committees to call upon those who were working at the lower rate.[141] Two days later, picketing and interviewing were still being arranged.[142]

From the crowd, a rank-and-file carpenter raised the fatal point when he asked Pearce

> what were the relations of the strikers to each other? Was a man to accept 12s if it was offered to him, or was he to stand out not only for 12s for himself, but till all the men received 12s?

On being told that the ASC&J allowed each man to make his own arrangement, the workman replied:

> Then it is not a strike, Mr Chairman. It is unconstitutional, for it is against the principles of strikes.
> Several voices: Oh, nonsense![143]

The views of the complainant attracted more support as the Masters showed no sign of retreat. Groups on the fringes of the gathering on Wednesday afternoon debated whether the unions should have begun by calling a general strike until everyone got the higher rates. The prospect of a victory for the employers convinced a body of the strikers that it was fast becoming time to withdraw those who had won the increase.[144]

Carpenters - Fremantle

On the Saturday prior to the proposed stoppage, eighteen of the twenty carpenters who gathered in Fremantle Park agreed to hold off until they heard the result of negotiations. Their chairman, Mr W W Dobson, proposed that course of inaction since the Fremantle men could not win if their fellows in Perth accepted a lower rate than he was receiving

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[140] *WA*, 2 February 1897, p. 3.
[141] *WA*, 2 February 1897, p. 3.
[142] *WA*, 4 February 1897, p. 2.
[143] *WA*, 2 February 1897, p. 3.
[144] *WA*, 4 February 1897, p. 2.

'from a good and just' employer. Were the strike to fail, competition for contracts, he feared, would force all Masters to refuse twelve shillings.[145]

On the first morning, a few stopped for a brief while but no member of the ASC&J had walked off, according to its branch secretary. Carpenters in government joinery shops continued as usual. During the August dispute, the Commissioner of Works had promised to match the standard rate in non-government employment. Some tradesmen employed by the government were getting only ten shillings or ten shillings and sixpence, which Diver said was their 'own fault', an explanation which did not speak well of the Society's organisation.[146]

Importing labour

Although the Employers' Association had endorsed a plan to import workers from the other colonies, it did not immediately initiate recruitment. Its unofficial spokesperson believed that the strike would collapse within a few days and that, meanwhile, the places could be filled 'from that constantly flowing' tide of labour into the colony.[147] He attributed the delay in the arrival of the 'free labourers' to the difficulty in securing berths in the wake of the shipping disputes.[148] Other grounds for doubting that volunteers were rushing from the East were that they had to pay half of their own fares and had no certainty of continuous employment, since they were being recruited through the Association on behalf of its members who would offer the jobs.[149] One unnamed contractor is supposed to have acted on his own behalf by telegraphing Melbourne for twelve – or was it fourteen? - carpenters, ten of whom went to work during the second week. Were they more than the usual inflow?[150] They had arrived too soon to be part of the Employers' Association contingent. One employer explained the lack of information about the scabs as a precaution against strikers' meeting them on disembarking to persuade them not to work.[151] The Plasterers believed that followers of their craft would be recognisable by the swag of tools they carried.[152]

An unidentified official from the Employers' Association later felt that the resumption of work had removed any need to recruit men from the East.[153] A fortnight after the dispute had ended, another anonymous source denied that their plan had been a ploy, telling a reporter that the Association had contracted seventy-five men from Melbourne, but had not finalised arrangements for an equal number in Sydney before deciding not to proceed. He expected that the Melbourne contingent would allow employers to weed out the 'duffers', which might have included militants.[154] The *West Australian* did not report the arrival of their seventy-five from Melbourne during March.

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[145] *WA*, 15 February 1897, p. 3.
[146] *WA*, 4 February 1897, p. 2.
[147] *WA*, 2 February 1897, p. 3.
[148] *WA*, 4 February 1897, p. 2.
[149] *WA*, 13 February 1897, p. 5.
[150] *WA*, 2 February 1897, p. 3, 11 February, p. 5, 13 February 1897, p. 5; when the dispute was over, the *Morning Herald* carried reports of expected arrivals but gave no details, *MH*, 16 February, p. 5, 18 February 1897, p. 11.
[151] *WA*, 11 February 1897, p. 5.
[152] *WA*, 9 February 1897, p. 5; a labourer carried his pick, shovel and larry strapped across his back in a sugar bag known as a banjo. A hod was even more obvious.
[153] *WA*, 15 February 1897, p. 3.
[154] *WA*, 25 February 1897, p. 5.

No doubt, individual builders continued to hire tradesmen from the Eastern colonies, and it was perhaps their arrival that the *Morning Herald* noted after the Carpenters had returned.[155]

Plasterers

Although the Plasterers' claims overlapped with those of the other trades, its dispute was in some ways distinct, starting and finishing at different dates to emerge united and victorious. In part, they won because the installation of laths before applying three coats made it harder for off-siders to 'jump up'. Those assistants, in turn, were among the most experienced labourers because of the knacks in mixing 'the mud', and so they too were not easy to replace.[156]

Fremantle

In another peculiarity, the Fremantle branch took the lead, debating the higher daily rate on Monday 18 January, before insisting on the increase from the next Monday.[157] At their half-yearly meeting on Thursday, 28 January, all tradesmen at the Port reported receiving the extra shilling. They appointed two delegates to the mass meeting in Perth on the Saturday afternoon [30th] but made no plan to meet before Wednesday, 3 February, suggesting that they did not intend to stop work on Monday, 1 February.[158] Nonetheless, when three or four employers reverted to the old wage, their men withdrew. Sub-contractors were paying the higher rate, while piece-rates were common so that no daily rate applied. (Piece rates are not to be confused with piece-work, another term for sub-contracting.) Plasterers and labourers on three, perhaps four, of the dozen large buildings that were under way 'wholly or partly threw down their tools' rather than give up the bird in their hand. The Masters, however, seemed united in their resistance, although several sub-contractors had adopted the lower rate only after pressure from their principals.[159] When the Plasterers met on February 3, they condemned as 'unfair, and mean', the Employers' Association's pressure on a local firm to lockout its plasterers who were getting twelve shillings. No less offensive was the willingness of Perth unionists to accept jobs in Fremantle from a Master who had refused the new rate.[160]

Demonstrating more grit than many other sections of the building trades, the Fremantle Plasterers voted that the two-thirds of the locals in receipt of the higher rate should contribute half of their earnings to support those on strike.[161] The branch remained resolute, deciding to stop the few jobs where the higher wage was not in force. On Saturday, 13 February, they voted to withdraw all those not getting the twelve shillings from Monday. Maintaining their 'very determined position', eight members there struck, with only one failing to do so.[162] On Saturday, 20th, the branch accepted a compromise

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[155] *MH*, 16 February 1897, p. 5, 18 February 1897, p. 11.
[156] Shields, Thesis, pp. 107-10; *Sydney Morning Herald*, 3 December 1929, p. 9; *Transcript*, 1913 ABLF Award, pp. 272-3.
[157] *WA*, 19 January 1897, p. 4, 26 January 1897, p. 4; *MH*, 25 January 1897, p. 5. Secretary of the Plasterers, Herbert Bush, warned off his fellows, *Australian Workman*, 3 October 1896, p. 2.
[158] *WA*, 28 January 1897, p. 2; *MH*, 1 February 1897, p. 4.
[159] *WA*, 2 February 1897, p. 3.
[160] *WA*, 2 February 1897, p. 3.
[161] *WA*, 4 February 1897, p. 2.
[162] *WA*, 15 February 1897, p. 3, 16 February 1897, p. 5; *MH*, 16 February 1897, p. 5.

under which the strikers would return on eleven shillings until 1 March after which the higher rate was to become universal.[163]

Perth

When Plasterers met at Jacoby's on 22 January, they agreed to meet again on Saturday, 30th, to decide on action for higher wages, while supporting the demand for twelve shillings by the Fremantle branch. They also wanted an end to the sub-letting of government contracts.[164] At the next assembly, the secretary told fifty union and non-union plasterers that all his members had the increase. The gathering then voted twenty-five to sixteen to give employers a week's notice to pay the extra to all non-unionists, over much dissent at any delay.[165] On Wednesday, 3 February, the Perth branch reminded the Masters that, from the next Monday, its members would not work alongside anyone on less than twelve shillings for eight hours. A meeting of unionists and non-members on the following evening affirmed the rightness of the claim, yet favoured negotiations.[166] The outlook was confirmed by the welcome that they extended to a contractor when he announced that he had met the demand for higher wages.[167]

Thus, the Perth Plasterers joined the strike after it had been going for a week. When the branch met on Wednesday evening, 10th, some reported that employers were 'boycotting' unionists and compliant sub-contractors, and were making eleven shillings the general rate, though they continued to pay extra for special categories of workers. The men argued for several hours over whether to call out those on the higher rate, before pledging to follow the decisions of the mass meeting of all the building workers on the coming Saturday.[168]

In fact, the Plasterers ignored the disarray of the Carpenters and Labourers by voting 'unanimously to continue the struggle to the bitter end'. Although their officers claimed to have 'plenty of funds' to support the six of their fellows not getting the twelve shillings, the branch doubled the daily levy on those at work to two shillings.[169] When the fifty plasterers met again on Wednesday, 17 February, they provided strike pay for fifteen men not in receipt of the extra shilling.[170]

Union and non-union plasterers met on Saturday 20 February, and again on the following Tuesday, by which time all but three were on the higher rate. The meeting decided to push on for them too, confident of complete success since Masters were asking the union to supply men at the top rate.[171] On Saturday 27, they again agreed to persevere to make the higher rate universal.[172] By 6 March, all were in work, and almost all had the twelve shillings so that the branch decided to call off its strike and refund the

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[163] *WA*, 22 February 1897, p. 5.
[164] *WA*, 23 January 1897, p. 5.
[165] *MH*, 1 February 1897, p. 4.
[166] *WA*, 4 February 1897, p. 2.
[167] *WA*, 9 February 1897, p. 5.
[168] *WA*, 11 February 1897, p. 5.
[169] *WA*, 15 February 1897, p. 3. That the Plasterers moved their meeting from the Esplanade to Jacoby's café to avoid press scrutiny of their discussions raises the prospect that the endorsement had not been unanimous.
[170] *MH*, 18 February 1897, p. 3.
[171] *WA*, 24 February 1897, p. 4.
[172] *WA*, 1 March 1897, p. 4.

unused levies.[173] They had started later and lasted two weeks longer than the carpenters, and were in a stronger position than the painters.

Painters

In keeping with the policy of the thirty members of the Operative Painters' and Decorators' Union, eight in the Port struck on 15 February after their employer refused to lift their rate to ten shillings.[174] Six others continued to work, some at nine shillings and others at ten. A Fremantle contractor pointed to operatives who were paying their own fares from Perth to work at the lower rate.[175] It is noteworthy that the painters' claim was for the wage of an experienced labourer, not that of a time-served tradesman. Across much of the industry, the lines between the skilled and their assistants were porous. Clearly, the strikers were not decorators, and perhaps were mere brush-hands. House-painting had turned into 'a kind of casual trade for all sorts to enter', with the Melbourne *Trades Hall Gazette* remarking in 1889 that a man could be a dish-washer one day and a 'painter' the next.[176] One Master painter offered the higher wage to a skilled man, a policy on which the union had no settled policy, thereby adding to the divisions among the workmen.[177]

Differential rates

Throughout the dispute, both sides supported differential rates for what we now label productivity, with some labourers complaining that they were on the same money as the 'totally incompetent':

> I consider myself a competent workman and yet am only earning as much as others who have never handled bricks or mortar before. Then again I am getting nine shillings per day and some of my mates on other jobs are being paid ten shillings, and so if it comes to a strike I'm ready.[178]

Unionists often favored such discriminations because they were more likely to be in demand than the drifters.[179] Builders' labourers were divided between navvies and those with knacks, such as hod-carriers and scaffolders, with the latter expecting more pay, a distinction which drew on experience, energy and competence, not formal training.[180]

Nonetheless, all grades in every trade resented an employer's setting their wages according to his estimate of their worth.[181] The Masters wanted to pay for results, using piece-rates to push up output and by allowing one man a few pence more to set a

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[173] *WA*, 8 March 1897, p. 4, 20 March 1897, p. 5.
[174] *MH*, 15 February 1897, p. 5; Pearce had told the Fremantle painters to be unanimous for the ten shillings before expecting help from the TLC, *MH*, 29 January 1897, p. 5.
[175] *WA*, 16 February 1897, p. 5.
[176] *Trades Hall Gazette*, 13 April 1889, p. 8; next year, one Master Painter reported that he had dismissed seven men who had claimed to be tradesmen but, in truth, were failed 'Tailors, boot-makers, grocers and drapers all'. He feared that such untrained brush-hands went from job to job picking up a knack here, or a trick there, until, after a few months, they styled themselves as contractors', *BEJ*, 1 March 1890, p. 77; Jeff Rich, 'Victorian Building Workers and their Unions, 1860-1890', Ph D Thesis, ANU, 1993, p. 60; Shields, Thesis, pp. 111-17; McQueen. 'Improvising Nomads', *JACH*, 2008, pp. 239-42.
[177] *WA*, 16 February 1897, p. 5.
[178] *WA*, 28 January 1897, p. 2.
[179] *WA*, 16 February 1897, p. 5.
[180] *WA*, 13 January 1897, p. 5; *Frameworks of Flesh*, chapter 5.
[181] Coghlan, *Labour and Industry in Australia*, III, pp. 1575-76.

cracking pace for the rest so as to intensify exploitation.[182] For craftsmanship, they paid top money, as with decoration in paint or plaster, and weaving an arch or chimney.

Facing defeat

Mellor called the failure of the tradesmen and the labourers to support each other on some of the sites was 'a disgrace to the intelligence of the working man'. By contrast, the finest spirit had been displayed when two members who had been offered work at the higher rate had stood aside so that impoverished newcomers could have a start. Mellor reported the success of picketing one job where the contractor had been reduced to using boys as hod-carriers: 'You have already induced three lots to leave this building. I wish you could induce this present lot to go, for they are no use to me'. The Society had expelled the sole scab in its ranks, which did not solve its problems with non-unionists.[183] By 8 February, three-quarters of BLS members were on the higher rate and only one needed to draw strike pay.[184]

The building unions elected Mellor to chair their strike committee and endorsed a mass meeting for Wednesday 10 February to debate whether to end the dispute, or to call out all building workers.[185] When he fell ill and was unable to arrange this crucial event, Carpenters' secretary Diver promised to book a room but could not find one suitable for the Wednesday. He felt that Thursday was 'an inconvenient day'. After consulting Mellor, he secured a room at the Oddfellows for Friday.[186] What happened next was closer to sabotage than farce. The Carpenters' Society held a smoke night on the floor above the strike meeting. Diver explained that the dispute had caused that social to be postponed to this Friday; he and Pearce felt that 'they must keep faith' with those who had paid for their tickets.[187]

Downstairs, labourers and tradesmen argued about how to proceed. Overshadowing their differences was the fact that fewer than 300 had come and many left before the votes were taken. The wording of Mellor's initial motion conveyed that the campaign was in a mess:

> That in view of the somewhat disorganised state of those employed in the building trade, a committee be appointed at this meeting to draw up a scheme for uniting the whole of the said trades in one federation with a view of preventing ill-considered strikes in the future, and also for the purpose of forming a substantial defence fund.

The Bricklayers' secretary seconded the proposal, listing three peculiarities of the industry as grounds for supporting closer ties: first, the tradesmen and labourers depended on each other to perform their tasks; secondly, they all worked on an hour's notice and thus needed a body which could act promptly in their interests; thirdly, the new council could respond according to the conditions across the industry.[188]

The unanimity behind Mellor's motion dissolved as soon as others suggested steps requiring immediate action or further sacrifice. Martin Hannah from the Bricklayers

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[182] *WA*, 9 February 1897, p. 5.
[183] *WA*, 8 February 1897, p. 2.
[184] *WA*, 10 February 1897, p. 3.
[185] *WA*, 8 February 1897, p. 2, 15 February 1897, p. 3.
[186] *WA*, 12 February 1897, p. 6.
[187] *WA*, 9 February 1897, p. 5, 15 February 1897, p. 3.
[188] *WA*, 13 February 1895, p. 5.

wanted 'all workers employed on buildings where the increased wages are not being publicly paid … to cease work on Saturday next'. Mellor and Monty Miller spoke against on the grounds that no one knew who was getting the increase. Mellor declared that the only way to get over that confusion was to call everyone out tomorrow, which was carried by a large majority of the small attendance. The Plasterers' secretary, Furniss, contended that the motion made them a 'laughing stock' because barely five percent of the 3,000 building workers were present to support it; he blamed the Carpenters' officials, Pearce and Diver, for instructing their members to return on Monday, a betrayal evidenced by their absence.[189]

When the carpenters met on the Esplanade on the next afternoon, they peppered Diver and Pearce with uncomplimentary remarks for recommending a return to work 'pending negotiations'. Monty Miller had already compared Pearce's attendance at the social instead of the mass meeting with Nero's fiddling,[190] while a voice from the crowd accused Pearce of 'drinking champagne upstairs'.[191] Pearce rebutted Diver's explanation for the debacle of the previous night, declaring that discussions with the Masters had convinced him that his members would be best served by refusing to join an industry-wide stoppage, 'and that was the reason for the absence of the society from the mass meeting'. The fault, he averred, lay with the lack of organisation in the trades,[192] to which a carpenter interjected: 'Why didn't you think of that before?'[193]

Others attributed the disarray to Pearce's mismanagement. Miller complained that Pearce and Diver had not kept him informed as a leader of the non-unionist section of the strikers. Miller's son admitted that, while he had gone out for two weeks, he had been forced to return by 'dire necessity' and because of the disorder inside the ASC&J.[194] The vote on a motion to extend the strike exposed how chaotic matters had become when 'derisive laughter' greeted Pearce's declaration that the motion had been lost although only seven had raised their hands either way.[195]

Part VI - The making of classes

That the Masters had won without needing their state to apply the Masters and Servants Act, or call out the police or the troops, as had become commonplace in the three Eastern board colonies since 1888, demonstrated the imbalance of the classes. Nonetheless, the smallness of the dispute and the rawness of colonial life exposed the structured dynamics that are part of every contest between capital and labour. By 1897, both proletarians and the bourgeoisie in Western Australia could draw on more than 100 years of struggles from across the world in the making of their classes, whether as consciousness or organisationally. Neither contender was learning the alphabet, or even writing on a blank

[189] *WA*, 13 February 1895, p. 5.
[190] *WA*, 13 February 1897, p. 5.
[191] *MH*, 15 February 1897, p. 5; seven years later, Pearce recalled having been black-balled for a time, *CPD*, v. 22, 26 October 1904, p. 6053. This seems likely because after carpenters went back to cottage work some got the higher rate - but not with their previous employers, *WA*, 16 February 1897, p. 5.
[192] *WA*, 13 February 1897, p. 5.
[193] *MH*, 15 February 1897, p. 5.
[194] *WA*, 13 February 1897, p. 5.
[195] *WA*, 15 February 1897, p. 5.

slate. Nonetheless, because class formation is an experience in response to performing as a thing, consciousness has to be relived and organisations remade.

A gap existed between the condition of the classes globally and the level of its development in the colony, which had been self-governing since only 1890. The newcomers on both sides of the class divide brought experiences from elsewhere in Australia and from the United Kingdom, but many of their organisations were less than a year old, for example, the Master Plasterers did not form their Association until the 1897 dispute had been running for two weeks.[196]

The strike spotlights a perennial dilemma for working people: is the best way to build up a union by initiating a campaign to attract members, or by constructing a fortress before taking on the boss? There are plenty of examples of neither succeeding. To move too soon is as likely to end in defeat as waiting for maximum strength is sure to result in inertia. That the defeat in February weakened the Builders' Labourers' Society was clear in June when only twenty attended, though seven joined.[197]

The conduct of the strike highlighted the weaknesses in the unions. Confusion reigned over who should have stopped. Few insisted on one out, all out. Even Mellor went along with calling out only those on jobs where the claims had not been met for all workers. In those cases, there was no suggestion that tradesmen should stop in support of labourers. Had the industry been organised thoroughly, it might have been sensible not to call everyone out at once. As it was, the failure to mobilise all the unionists was disastrous, if explicable given that so many had joined in the belief that they would not need to struggle. As a result, workers had difficulty in recognising the line between unionists and non-unionists, between strikers and non-strikers, or even between strikers and scabs. Instead, a cry of blackleg against Miller junior was rebuffed with a call to show towards each other 'the kindness and sympathy' not displayed by 'the Weld Club'.[198]

The approach of the Furniture Trades Union to securing the twelve shillings suggested lessons for the others. An agreement with the employers required that the union give a month's notice of any alteration. A meeting on 27 January voted to inform members of the proposal to enforce the higher rate by summoning them to a special meeting to decide on a course of action should the employers refuse the improved terms. The union also warned members who continued to work below the new minimum rate that they were to be fined or expelled.[199] These preparations contributed to the cohesion needed to bring success, given that the Union had only £15 in the bank.[200] Of course, the furniture trade was easier to arrange because the Union had fewer members, they were settled in workshops and were fairly well skilled. They were also united by their obsession with excluding Chinese-made goods.[201] Although rejection of the Chinese and Italians fractured the class, opposition to them added to the solidarity among the majority.

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[196] *WA*, 13 February 1897, p. 5.
[197] *WA*, 2 June 1897, p. 4; the BLS transfered its meetings to the Oddfellows Hall.
[198] *WA*, 13 February 1897, p. 5.
[199] *WA*, 28 January 1897, p. 2.
[200] *MH*, 28 January 1897, p. 6.
[201] *WA*, 25 March 1897, p. 4; the Furniture Trades Union forced the resignation of a native-born Chinese-Britisher, Charles J Warring, from the Bickford and Lucas furniture factory; Warring then went into business with his brothers, *WA*, 25 February 1897, p. 4, 26 February, p. 2, 25 March 1897, p. 4; *MH*, 16

A federation

The collapse of the strike demonstrated the need to combine support for an industry-wide council with recruitment drives for each of the trades. Among the Bricklayers, the newly arrived Martin Hannah backed a federation of the trades.[202] Mellor spoke of a single all-grades body and disparaged the division between the craft societies and New Unions.[203] Pearce's absence from the Friday night meeting expressed his opposition to such notions. Although the Plasterers had secured the increase, they were reluctant to merge into a single building union because they saw themselves as 'not yet thoroughly organised' and so 'it was not an opportune time for them to venture upon so large an undertaking'.[204] In April, Mellor urged the TLC to bring the unions together through reviving the Eight-hours campaign.[205]

From 1896, preparations for a parliamentary voice in a Labor Party contributed to a sense of class beyond each trade, industry and locale. The impulse towards this representation gained from the campaigns to support Federation so that, by March-April 1901, the party attracted a quarter of the votes for the State Assembly and a third for the inaugural House of Representatives. [206] Such achievements added to cohesion at the expense of militancy.

All the unions had to overcome distinctions between Perth and Fremantle, between the coast and the goldfields, between labourers and tradesmen, in addition to the fracturing caused by differential rates within the same trade. The effort required was more taxing around building sites, where men were forever coming and going, than at workshops. In Perth during the gold boom, these difficulties were compounded by blow-ins chasing a day's pay to tide them over. Mellor had lamented that workmen did not know each other's names. One way to overcome this isolation was through campaigns such as the 1897 dispute, which brought hundreds together for the first time. Other methods were the parades on Eight-hour day in October and for May Day, the speakers' platforms on the Esplanade every Sunday, followed by discussions at the Labour Church. In like vein, four weeks after the strike collapsed, a BLS social attracted 120 paying guests, including representatives from the other building unions and the TLC, where 'mirth, music and good fellowship' flowed from recitations and clog dancing.[207] The benefit concerts for Mellor's family were more examples of cultural endeavours, which, though not counter-hegemonic, at least were distinct from the offerings of entrepreneurs and the official ideologies under compulsory schooling. Labor still no voice in the press.

Agitators

February 1897, p. 5, 17 February 1897, p. 11; Anne Atkinson, *Asian immigrants to Western Australia, 1829-1901*, University of Western Australia Press, Nedlands, 1988, p. xvi.

[202] *WA*, 13 February 1897, p. 5. 25 February 1897, p. 4; and appointed two delegates, 25 March 1897, p. 4; *MH*, 18 February 1897, p. 3.

[203] *WA*, 8 February 1897, p. 2.

[204] *WA*, 11 February 1897, p. 5.

[205] *WA*, 9 April 1897, p. 3.

[206] Gibbney, *Labor in Politics*, pp. 347-53; BTC representatives spoke about the value of 'complete unity' at the BLS meeting in June, *WA*, 2 June 1897, p. 4.

[207] *WA*, 17 March 1897, p. 4.

Mellor and Miller were potent orators but were they more effective as agitators than as organisers? Miller addressed an open-air strike meeting with 'much attractiveness and grace of style' and, for more than thirty minutes, 'quoted with fluency and effect from Burns, Emerson, Herbert Spencer and Mill'.[208] Firing up rank-and-file enthusiasm is appropriate when recruiting around the jobs and for sustaining the commitment of those who join, but unions cannot survive on words alone. They need people with the time, the knacks and the energy to fulfill bureaucratic tasks.

After the audited accounts of the Mellor Relief Fund showed £54 paid to canvassers, an anonymous correspondent to the *West Australian* lamented that no friend or comrade of Mellor's had emulated the principles practiced by the deceased.[209] The prospect of a volunteer's succeeding has to be seen against the difficulties that the Bakers' Society had in collecting donations, which was drawn out over two months while retrieving its subscription lists.[210] Its honorary officers relied on members attending branch meetings, which was never easy because of their early morning starts. With no paid staff, the unions employed canvassers, as did most charities. On becoming secretary of the coastal TLC in April 1898, Fred Davis, a bricklayer, was the colony's first fulltime union official.[211]

Organisational weaknesses were sooner overcome than ideological ones. The utopianism in labour thinking, and not only in the West, became apparent shortly after the 1897 strike when Monty Miller accepted the presidency of the Theosophical Society, at which he presented Madame Blavatsky's critique of Darwin.[212] Miller never faltered in advocating reform, speaking on the Esplanade every Sunday in 1899, indeed, to any gathering that would have him.[213] That year, he proposed anti-capitalist resolutions at May Day, contending that 'monopoly' caused 'social misery, mental degradation and political dependence'.[214] He warned the Henry George League against bi-metallism in favour of 'labour notes', a notion popularised by the Frenchman, Pierre Joseph Prouhdon (1809-65).[215] Miller favoured a single-tax on land but only in as much as it precluded other imposts.[216] His opposition to the colony's joining the Commonwealth differed from the arguments of the comrades he had left in Victoria, who endorsed the Federal principle but rejected the draft constitution as undemocratic.[217] Miller idealised the federalism of

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[208] *WA*, 8 February 1897, p. 2.
[209] *WA*, 9 February 1898, p. 5, 15 February 1898, p. 5.
[210] *WA*, 6 July 1897, p. 4, 20 July, p. 4, 3 August, p. 5, 30 August 1897, p. 4.
[211] *WA*, 29 April 1898, p. 3; Gibbney, Thesis, p. 28.
[212] *WA*, 5 March 1897, p. 4, 20 March 1897, p. 5, 3 April 1897, p. 4; Jill Roe, *Beyond belief: theosophy in Australia 1879-1939*, University of NSW Press, Kensington, 1986, pp. 36 and 118; Hearn, *Labour History*, November 2003.
[213] *WA*, 13 May 1899, p. 5. In addressing the Women's Christian Temperance Union, he explained the effect of alcohol on mind and body, *WA*, 11 December 1899, p. 4, following from his three lectures during 1897 on 'The Brain and the Nervous System', 5 February 1898, p. 4.
[214] *WA*, 8 May 1899, p. 6.
[215] *WA*, 8 December 1899, p. 4, on whom see K Marx, 'The Poverty of Philosophy. Answer to The Philosophy of Poverty by M. Proudhon', Karl Marx-Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, volume 6, Lawrence & Wishart, London 1976, pp. 105-212; for the persistence of Proudhon's ideas among Communists see Max Raphael, *Proudhon Marx Picasso, Three Studies in the Sociology of Art*, Lawrence & Wishart, London, 1979.
[216] *WA*, 14 June 1899, p. 7.
[217] Hugh Anderson, *Tocsin: Contesting the Constitution*, Red Rooster Press, Melbourne, 2000.

the Swiss because it was rooted in landed proprietorship.[218] Fearful that Western Australia was too immature to survive federating, he presented a lyrical defence of life on the land and of the local farmers whose interests would be swamped by the political and economic forces entrenched in the Eastern colonies.[219] Into this medley of philosophical and political schemes, Miller wove his leadership of the Social Democratic Federation from 1901.[220]

Although Mellor was more scientific than Miller in seeing the employers as 'the enemy', he too was subject to the belief that land-owning monopolists were the root of the social question: 'Strikes in the long run have a bad effect upon almost everyone but the landowner, and he goes smoothly along through it all'. Mellor accused the urban landholders of using 'dummy', or 'spurious' contractors, in an alliance with the architects to impose a 'tyranny' over the 'genuine' contractors who would otherwise have met the higher rates.[221]

Given what we have seen about Mellor as proletarian protagonist, what can we say about how the labour movement in the West might have differed had he lived?[222] Although 'what if?' invites vacuity, we can suppose that, even had he gone into parliament, he would have countered, for a time, the cautiousness of Pearce and of Henry Daglish (premier in 1904-05) who both found their way into non-Labor parties. What can be said with greater confidence is that had Mellor stayed on in the West, the story of its builders' labourers would have been different. Following Mellor's death, a shuffle took place among office-bearers in July, by when Martin had recovered sufficiently to serve as treasurer, and C A Ellis became secretary and J Ede president.[223] With Mellor's presence, it is less likely that their Society would have collapsed between 1898 and 1908, or that, thereafter, its successors would have remained a minor player until the 1970s.[224]

The grounds for these hypotheses are Mellor's role during the 1897 dispute, which carried forward the militancy, intelligence and span of sympathies that he had exhibited throughout his career, and the respect that these qualities evoked when he met his death by a means so common among builders' labourers as to defy being called an accident.[225] Of this much more we can be certain: Mellor would have answered the call from the 1899 Trades Union and Labor Congress at Coolgardie:

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[218] *WA*, 14 June 1899, p. 7.
[219] *WA*, 27 April 1899, p. 3.
[220] Gibbney, Thesis, pp. 94-99.
[221] *WA*, 8 February 1897, p. 2.
[222] Mellor's death was one of several where promise was cut down, such as Victorian Frank Hyett in 1919, who died from the Spanish Flu, A Scarlett, *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol. 9, MUP, Carlton, 1983, pp. 422-3, and Percy Brookfield, Industrial Socialist MLA for Broken Hill, who fell to a madman's bullet in 1921, Paul Robert Adams, *The Best Hated Man in Australia': The Life and Death of Percy Brookfield 1875-1921*, Puncher & Wattmann, The Glebe, 2010. In addition, there is the loss of the unknown worker-soldiers who did not survive the battlefields that shook the faith in capitalism of survivors such as the West Australian Bert Facey, *A Fortunate Life*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Fremantle, 1981, pp. 249-80.
[223] *WA*, 17 June 1897, p. 4.
[224] The Metropolitan Builders' Labourers' Union of Workers registered on 29 October 1913 with 310 members, and got its award on 20 February 1914, Western Australia, *Reports of Proceedings before the Court of Arbitration*, vol. XII, 1913, p. 241, vol. XIII, 1914, p. 245.
[225] See *Frameworks of Flesh*, pp. 84-85.

> We earnestly appeal to every individual Unionist – every ardent Laborist – to give his best energies to the great work the Congress has initiated. Let every man hear duty's call upon him to be an **Organiser**, a **Teacher**, a **Worker** for the Cause.[226]

[226] Introductory Note, *Report*, First Western Australian Trades' Union and Labor Congress, 1899, emphasis in original; Oliver, *Unity is strength*, pp. 5-7.