

The Great Shearer's Strike of 1891

On 13 January, 1891, a telegram was sent to Barcaldine. It read:

Private information. Federated pastoralists levying three hundred thousand pounds throughout Australia to fight Queensland...Employers plan to raise thousands blacklegs to take district after district in rotation. Keep this strictly secret. Act cautiously. Big trouble ahead.

Big trouble did indeed lay ahead with Queensland Pastoralists determined to smash rural unions.

By 1889 Queensland shearers and bush workers were organized into unions. In response local graziers met in Barcaldine and formed the Pastoral Employers Association (one of the forerunners of the UGA).

The Pastoralists proclaimed "Freedom of Contract" allowing men to be engaged in shearing sheds free of union rules. Without consultation they announced severe wage reductions and refused to negotiate, ignoring unions and effectively challenging their right to exist.

On February 1, 1891, The Queensland Shearers' Union and the Queensland Labourers' Union issued the "Bushmen's Official Proclamation" to all its members. It read, in part:

"An unprovoked and unjustifiable attack has been made upon the above union by the squatters' associations. It therefore becomes our duty to take such action as will best conserve our interests and frustrate the attempts of organised Capitalism to crush unionism and reduce wages in this district....."

"...Fellow unionists! We call upon you all, individually and unitedly, to pull the unions through this fight let the cost be what it may...Here in the bush we have no voice in the making of the laws and no share in the Government, we are disenfranchised and denied all rights as citizens, we have only our unions to which we can look for justice and if our unions go down we are totally enslaved. Fellow unionists, the squatters expect the Queensland bush unions will fight hard but they do not know how hard. We call upon you to show them..."

"... We have a right to resolve this for, disenfranchised though we are, we are the men whose labour mainly upholds Queensland. It is our toil that brings rich dividends to banks and fat incomes to squatters and profitable trade to great cities. Yet we have no votes by which we can secure laws to protect us even in our earnings and the squatting companies dream of dragooning us into submission with hordes of police protected blacklegs when we refuse to work under any conditions which profit mongers who fleece us choose to draw up in some bank parlour....."

The pastoralists received the full support of the conservative colonial government who sent more than 1000 armed soldiers and special constables to central Queensland. “Scab” or “blackleg” labourers were provided with military escorts to prevent confrontations with unionists.

Barcaldine became the headquarters for the strikers and the site of the biggest strike camp just north of the town at Lagoon Creek. Strike camps were also set up in other country centres such as Clermont and Hughenden.

In Barcaldine strike meetings were often held in the shade of a ghost gum in the town’s main street - which came to be known as the Tree of Knowledge.

With unionists, soldiers and strike breaking labour pouring into Barcaldine and surrounds the situation was critical. By mid-March some 4500 people were in Barcaldine or camped nearby. The threat of a bloodbath was real.

It was this grim prospect that inspired Henry Lawson’s famous lines:

*...We’ll make the tyrants feel the sting
Of those that that they would throttle;
They needn’t say the fault is ours
If blood should stain the wattle.*

But there was no bloodshed and the strikers showed tremendous discipline despite the forces ranged against them.

The strike began to lose momentum in March when police arrested strike leaders in Barcaldine and Clermont. A protracted trial of the arrested leaders ended in Rockhampton on May 20 with thirteen of the men sentenced to three years hard labour on St. Helena Island in Moreton Bay. The legitimacy of the arrests and fairness of the trial has been heavily debated by historians over the years.

In April, 377 “scabs” arrived on two trains heavily escorted by military personnel. One group left the train at Back Creek east of Barcaldine and were further escorted to Coreena station by a military party.

On the way an emu was shot and feathers plucked to adorn their hats - an idea later copied for Australian mounted forces who took part in action overseas.

With shearing now under way using non-union labour and the strike leaders removed from town morale of the unionists took a deep plunge. On June 20, 1891, its resources exhausted, the unions declared the strike at an end. But the end of the strike marked the beginning of renewed efforts to

pursue their cause through the ballot box. Rockhampton bookseller, William Kidston (and later Premier of Queensland) penned “The Ballot is the Thing” urging the shearers to seek retribution on election day:

*Then keep your heads, I say, my boys; your comrades in the town
Will help you yet to win a vote and put your tyrants down.
Throw your old guns aside, my boys; the ballot is the thing
They did not have to reckon with when George the Fourth was king.
The ballot is the thing, my boys, the ballot is the thing
Will show these men how long it is since George the Fourth was king. **

(* Refers to the obscure 1825 conspiracy law some claim was used to gaoil the strike leaders)

Ironically a by-election in 1892 in the seat of Barcoo provided the unions with their first opportunity for a voice in parliament. The death of local member Francis Murphy, a staunch supporter of the squatters’ cause during the strike, saw arrested but arrested but acquitted shearer Tommy Ryan, up against the conservatives’ choice , proprietor of the Western Champion, William Campbell.

On March 5, Ryan won the seat of Barcoo and became the first Labor parliamentary representative in Queensland. Just seven years later, in December 1899, Queensland went on to have the world’s first Labor Government.

The Shearers’ Strike of 1891 and the dramatic happenings around a large gum tree near Barcaldine railway station marked the beginnings of the working man’s voice in Queensland politics.

The Tree of Knowledge, so named because of all that had passed beneath its branches, is believed to be between 170 and 200 years old and every effort has been made to preserve it. Emergency surgery was performed in 1982, 1986, and 1990 and today it still stands as one of Australia’s most significant living breathing monuments to its proud workers.

In 1893 William Lane, editor of The Worker and an inspirational and radical journalist who was especially revered by the bushworkers, led a group of Australians to the New Australia and Cosme Colonies in Paraguay in South America to pursue his “Utopian dream”.

Amongst them were many disillusioned unionists and their families from Barcaldine including Denis Hoare (who returned in 1897 and became the first caretaker of the Barcaldine swimming pool in 1908).

Hugh Blackwell, one of the arrested strike leaders also went to Paraguay as did Mary Cameron who met her husband Billy Gilmore, and went onto become celebrated literary figure - Mary Gilmore.