

BRIEF HISTORY – Shearer's strike 1891 - Australia's is one of Australia's first and most important industrial disputes.

Working conditions for sheep shearers in 19th century Australia were atrocious.

In the late 1800's wool was one of Australia's largest industries. But as the wool industry grew, so did the number and influence of shearers.

By 1890, the Australian Shearers' Union boasted tens of thousands of members, and had unionised thousands of sheds.

At their annual conference in Bourke in 1890, the Union laid down a new rule, which prohibited members from working with non-union workers. Soon after, shearers at Jondaryan Station on the Darling Downs went on strike over this issue. As non-union labour was still able to process the wool, the Jondaryan shearers called for help.

The Rockhampton wharfies responded and refused to touch the Jondaryan wool. The unionists won the battle.

Shearers at the Logan Downs Shearing Station in Queensland already believed their pay rates and conditions were unacceptable, but were further angered when the station began to employ non-union men to do the work.

The union representing the shearers wanted the station to form an agreement, stating that the shearers' pay would not be reduced and that their rights would be protected. However because he wanted to reduce union influence, Logan Downs Station Manager Charles Fairbain wanted the shearers to sign the Pastoralists Association contract of free labor.

On January 5, 1891 the shearers announced a strike until the following demands for a contract were met:

1. Continuation of existing rates of pay
2. Protection of workers' rights and privileges
3. Just and equitable agreements

Exclusion of low-cost Chinese labour (which manifest itself later as Labor Party policy - the Immigration Restriction Act, also known as the White Australia Policy)

More than 1000 men downed shears and marched through the streets demanding better conditions. The potential for revolution dissolved when Aborigines, Kanaka Islanders and Chinese immigrants were enlisted to work for even cheaper wages.

This galvanised the squatters, and they formed the Pastoralists' Federal Council, to counter the strength of the unions. The battle lines were drawn, conflict was not far away; the only question was where and when.

Striking shearers formed armed camps outside of towns while they waited for their union organisers to negotiate. Thousands of armed soldiers protected non-union labour



and arrested strike leaders. The unionists retaliated by raiding shearing sheds, harassing non-union labour and committing acts of sabotage, although the incidents of actual violence or arson were few.

The strike spread quickly and from February through until May, central Queensland was on the brink of civil war.

Typical of the action, on the 28th of March 1891 dozens of shearers including a strong band of union leaders were arrested in towns nearest to the shearers' camps. Eleven strikers, with three union leaders among them, were arrested at the Clermont railway station. Mr Griffin, Mr Taylor and Mr Stewart, who all hold high-ranking union positions at the Sandy Creek Camp, were arrested and charged with conspiracy. A short-lived scuffle broke out between police and two of the men, Taylor and Stewart. The handcuffed trio were then marched through the town under heavy police guard.

Eight more union shearers were arrested and charged with causing a riot when they tried to prevent free labourers from travelling to work at Peak Downs.

In a carefully planned police operation, another seven shearers were arrested in Barcaldine. Around noon, two divisions of mounted infantry formed a line outside the union office in the town's main street, virtually hemming in a large crowd of onlookers who were mainly unionists. A detachment of the mounted infantry then rode to the office door as a contingent of police walked through the mounted lines and into the office, arresting five men: Thomas Ryan, Michael Murphy, William Fothergill, Hugh Blackwell and William Bennett. The prisoners were then marched across the street into the police station where they were charged with conspiracy. The formal charge being conspiracy with the aforementioned Mr Taylor and others to commit an unlawful act; to wit, to unlawfully prevent certain of Her Majesty's subjects from following their lawful occupation'. The five men were immediately put in the cells. Two more men were arrested on the same charge several hours later.

Tales of intimidation of strike-breakers and disturbing reports of violence in the bush are commonplace in many Queensland towns. Incidents of paddocks being set on fire, fences destroyed and houses, barns and woolsheds being torched have been revealed during the many court cases.

The shearers were fighting for the exclusive use of union labour to become standard policy among employers and wanted individual shearers to work on terms agreed between union officials and employers. The gulf between the pastoralists and shearers could not be wider as the employers cling to their demand for the right to negotiate with both union and non-union labour.

One of the first Mayday marches in the world took place during the strike on 1 May 1891 in Barcaldine. The Sydney Morning Herald reported that 1340 men took part of whom 618 were mounted on horse. Banners carried included those of the Australian Labor Federation, the Shearers' and Carriers' Unions, and one inscribed 'Young Australia'. The leaders wore blue sashes and the Eureka Flag was carried. The "Labor Bulletin" reported that cheers were given for "the Union", "the Eight-hour day", "the Strike Committee" and "the boys in gaol".

But the shearers were unable to hold out. The summer had been unseasonably wet, and the strike was poorly timed for maximum effect on the shearing season (winter). The union camps were full of hungry penniless shearers.

In August 1891, the Pastoralists emerged the victors at the conclusion of a two-day conference which effectively signalled the end of the shearers' strike. After a bitter and often violent five-month feud, representatives of the Amalgamated Shearers' Union and the Pastoralists' Union finally met and drew up an agreement which was in fact a total cave-in by the Shearers' Union.

Dozens, possibly hundreds of workers were arrested for their part in the fight against freedom of contract arrangements but the new agreement was based totally on that very principle - that employers may employ any form of labour they choose, be it union or non-union.

The pastoralists regarded the resolution as proof of the unquestionable' right of every employer to employ whom he pleases, as well as the 'unquestionable' right of every man to work for his livelihood.

Speaking at the conclusion of the conference, Shearers' Union leader Mr W. G. Spence backed down from his previous position, branding strikes as 'barbarous'.

But the employers' victory was hollow, Labour politician Mr Thomas Glassey told the Queensland Parliament. *'It simply means that the man who has the most money and the best social position is tingu to enforce his will, and that the man who has nothing but his labour to sell, must accept the terms offered or starve. The freedom rests with the man of means; the contract with the man who has no means,'* Mr Glassey said.

Thirteen union leaders were charged with sedition and conspiracy, taken to Rockhampton for the trial, convicted, and sentenced to three years in gaol on St Helena Island Prison.

The squatters had won this time, but it had proved a costly exercise.

The 1891 Shearers Strike is credited as being one of the factors for the formation of the Australian Labor Party.

Concluding the strike, the colonial administration ordered the arrest of the shearers' leaders and mounted troopers went to the camps and arrested the unionists involved. They were charged under British legislation with conspiracy and sedition. It was a mortal blow to the union and the shearers and by June the strike had collapsed. Thirteen of the union leaders were brought to trial at Rockhampton, and were sentenced to three years jail at the St Helena island prison.

The harsh suppression of this strike made many people in the trade union movement see the limitations of industrial action and the need for a political party to represent the interests of working people. Separate labor parties, called Labor Leagues, were formed in Queensland and in New South Wales, quickly taking a prominent role in politics. The parties later joined to become the Australian Labor Party.

The Second Shearers Strike - 1894

The Pastoral Association wanted to reduce wages for shearers from 20 shillings per 100 sheep to 17 shillings per 100 sheep.

17 June. A strike was ordered by the unionists. Martial law was reintroduced in Winton. More trouble occurred at Oondooroo Station.

3 July, "Ayrshire Downs" shearing shed was burned down and shots were fired.

4 July, An attempt was made to burn down "Oondooroo" shearing shed.

27 July, "Manuka" shearing shed was burned down.

2 September, "Dagworth Station" was attacked by a party of 16 men and the shearing shed was also burned down with the loss of 140 sheep.

17 September, The strike was called off.

From local newspapers of the day.

Armed shearers torch woolshed

5 July 1894 - Armed shearers burnt down an expensive woolshed on a remote Queensland shearing station yesterday.

About 20 men brandishing rifles rounded up a group of strike-breakers working on the Ayrshire Downs Station, 30 miles from Winton. The employees were held at gunpoint while the gang's ringleaders torched the property's woolshed. In just few short minutes, nothing was left of the expensive shed.

The incident was one of the most serious acts of deliberate violence ever seen in the outback and pastoralists fear the two-week-old strike has taken a frightening turn for the worse.

Queensland Colonial Secretary Mr Tozer has Instructed the police magistrate from Winton to swear in a special emergency contingent of constables to investigate the incident.

The latest industrial dispute between the Shearers and pastoralists is over a new agreement which includes pay cuts of up to six shillings for workers.

On Sunday, 17 June, a meeting of the Longrench Branch of the Australian Workers' Union voted not to accept work this season unless the old rates of pay were on offer.

Sheep station shoot out

4 September 1894 - A full-scale gun battle between police and rebel shearers broke out in the early hours of Sunday morning on a sheep station north-west of Winton.

Police witnesses say around 40 shots were fired and one unionist is believed dead. The shearers' strike is now so serious that the Colonial Secretary, Mr Tozer, told Parliament that the colony is on the verge of full-scale insurrection.

The trouble began when 16 armed men burnt the Dagworth Station woolshed to the ground. Owners of Dagworth, the three Macpherson brothers, had engaged a constable to help them guard the shed to protect it from the nightly burning sprees which have become common in the area.

About 12.30 a.m. several shots were fired into the shed. The four then opened fire on their attackers. During the 20-minute battle one of the rebels crept unseen to the shed and set it alight.

A few hours later a man, believed to be a prominent unionist, was found dead about two miles from Kyruna. Police believe the man, named Haffmeister, may have been wounded in the gun battle at Dagworth.

Police believe that the same gang is responsible for burning the Ayrshire Downs shed last July.

Dagworth Station, which shears about 80 000 sheep a season, is situated on the Upper Diamantina about 70 miles north-west of Winton.

In the wake of the violence, the government is expected to implement a total ban on the possession of firearms this week.

Now about to enter its third month, the shearers' strike began in June when pastoralists tried to introduce a new working agreement, which included pay cuts of up to six shillings.

Firearms to be banned

6 September 1894 - The carrying of firearms will be illegal under a new Bill proposed in the Queensland Parliament yesterday. Being in possession of ammunition will also be an offence and suspects can be searched and arrested. Premises suspected of containing firearms can also be searched.

Under the Premier's Peace Preservation Bill, which was read for the first time yesterday, trouble-spots can be proclaimed as districts where the Act should apply. Selling arms in the proclaimed districts will also be prohibited.

Here is the famous tree of knowledge at Barcaldine.



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