

CHAPTER FIVE

Kalgoorlie between the Wars: a mine of racism?

The bloody foreigners were attacking Australians in their own country. Tempers flared: volunteers were called for.

Manning Clark on the 1934 Kalgoorlie riots,
*History of Australia*¹

Introduction

On three notable occasions, the gold-mining town of Kalgoorlie was the scene of anti-southern European rioting – in 1916, 1919 and 1934. While the existing historiography of both the 1916² and 1919 riots³ has acknowledged the role of returned soldiers in these violent outbursts, the 1934 riots⁴ have predominantly been explained in terms of industrial tension, with little attention directed towards the possibility of RSL involvement. Indeed, Gilchrist recently distinguished them from the earlier outbursts by

¹ M. Cathcart, *Manning Clark's History of Australia*, (abridged), Penguin, Melbourne, 1996, p. 609.

² See C. A. Price, *Southern Europeans in Australia*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1963, pp. 208-9; A. Markus, *Australian Race Relations 1788-1993*, Allen and Unwin, St Leonards, 1994, p. 150; J. Yiannakis, 'Kalgoorlie Alchemy: Xenophobia, Patriotism and the 1916 Anti-Greek Riots', *Early Days*, vol. 2, no. 2, 1996; H. Gilchrist, *Australians and Greeks*, vol. 2, Halstead Press, Rushcutters Bay, 1997, pp. 23-28.

³ See J. Murray, 'The Kalgoorlie Woodline Strikes 1919-1920: A Study of Conflict Within the Working Class', *Studies in Western Australian History*, vol. 5, 1982; B. Oliver, *War and Peace in Western Australia: The Social and Political Impact of the Great War 1914-1926*, University of Western Australia Press, Nedlands, 1995, pp. 156-158, 'Disputes, Diggers and Disillusionment: Social and Industrial Unrest in Perth and Kalgoorlie 1918-24', *Studies in Western Australian History*, vol. 11, June 1990 and "'For only by the OBU shall Workmen's Wrongs be Righted'. A study of the One Big Union Movement in Western Australia, 1919 to 1922', in C. Fox and M. Hess (eds), *Papers in Labour History*, no. 5, April 1990; T. Vanderwiel, *The Goldfield Riot of August 1919*, unpublished manuscript, Battye Library, 1959.

⁴ See P. Bertola, *Ethnic Difference in Kalgoorlie 1893-1934*, unpublished Honours thesis, Murdoch University, 1978 and *Kalgoorlie, Gold, and the World Economy, 1893-1972*, unpublished PhD thesis, Curtin University of Technology, 1993, pp. 229-232; B. Bunbury, *Reading Labels on Jam Tins*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, South Fremantle, 1993, pp. 100-27; G. Casey and T. Mayman, *The Mile that Midas Touched*, Rigby, Adelaide, 1964, pp. 187-97; T. Docker and R. Gerritsen, 'The 1934 Kalgoorlie Riots', *Labour History*, no. 31, 1976; R. Gerritsen, 'The 1934 Kalgoorlie Riots', *University Studies in History*, vol. 5, no. 3, 1969; D. Hancock, 'Murder and Mayhem in Kalgoorlie', *This Australia*, vol. 5, no. 1, 1985; J-M. Volet, 'Some of the Reasons which led to a Night of Terror in Kalgoorlie and Boulder on Monday 29 January 1934', *Early Days*, vol. 9, no. 4, 1986. For a literary reference to the riots, see K. S. Prichard, *Winged Seeds*, Virago, London, 1984.

claiming that there had been ‘no military element’ in the 1934 disturbances.⁵ Instead, the most prevalent explanation for the explosion of racist sentiment in Kalgoorlie in 1934 has been that ‘it all started on the mines’, with racist workers demanding southern European exclusion to protect ‘British’ jobs. In order to assess these riots in context, this chapter begins by recounting the events in 1916 and 1919, before proceeding to an account of the 1934 Kalgoorlie riots. An examination of these incidents provides an important window into the rise and fall of racist ideology in the Kalgoorlie area over two decades, a perspective that cannot be achieved by treating each of the riots as individual events. In particular, attention is given to the industrial alliance between the Kalgoorlie sub-branch of the RSL and the local Chamber of Mines, appraising its role in the course of the riots and the direction of local ‘race debates’. From this vantage point, attention is shifted from the traditional paradigm of racist workers and their attempts to protect employment standards. It is argued that, although some miners undoubtedly participated in the 1934 riots, there were equally important, and hitherto ignored, signs of solidarity between Britisher miners and their southern European counterparts that should be assessed. The chapter concludes with an account of a six-week strike which took place on the mines just one year after the 1934 riots. When the riots and the strike are analysed together, race relations in Kalgoorlie can be viewed as much more fluid than has previously been assumed. It is demonstrated that such instances of workers uniting across perceived racial barriers provide an important corrective to the wider historiography of race relations in Australia.

The 1916 campaign against ‘enemy subjects’

In December 1916, inflammatory reports in the Kalgoorlie press blamed the King of Greece for the deaths of British and French soldiers at the hands of Greek troops.⁶ In revenge, some Kalgoorlie residents, led by returned soldiers, damaged and looted more than twenty Greek-run businesses. As Gilchrist described, ‘the ringleaders, including soldiers from a nearby training camp, accompanied by forty or fifty civilian

⁵ Gilchrist, *Australians and Greeks*, p. 358.

⁶ *Kalgoorlie Miner*, 8 December 1916.

youths, gathered near the Town Hall and, led by a soldier with a whistle, smashed the windows of three Greek shops in Cassidy Street'.⁷ From this beginning, the violence escalated until every Greek-owned business had been smashed and looted. Other rioters travelled to nearby Boulder on the tram, continuing the destruction of Greek shops in the main streets. The *Kalgoorlie Miner* reportage gave a detailed description of the riot and the subsequent court appearances of those arrested. However, it did not once mention that the ringleaders of the violence had been returned soldiers. More than forty arrests were made and, although some charges were for the relatively serious offences of escaping from legal custody, assaulting a policeman and wilful and malicious damage, those found guilty were, most commonly, fined. Only two men charged with theft were given prison sentences because, in the Magistrate's opinion, such a crime was much more serious than xenophobic rioting. Only the destruction of Greek-owned property could be construed, and presumably excused, as a display of patriotic passion.⁸ Returned soldier involvement in the riots was also downplayed by government authorities who were anxious to avoid responsibility for compensation claims, but the Acting Premier of Western Australia, Henry Lefroy, admitted that returned soldiers had been 'the ringleaders in almost every case of disorder of this nature'.⁹ Yiannakis' analysis of the riots suggests that the xenophobic and patriotic responses of Kalgoorlie returned soldiers were crucial to the direction of the riots. He cited one member of a deputation to the Minister for Works and Railways, who pointed out that 'soldiers had not only taken part in the riots, but that men in khaki were seen directing the raiders and were observed throwing out goods from shops to the crowd'.¹⁰

This dramatic outburst represented the climax of a concerted campaign to oust 'enemy subjects' from Kalgoorlie, a struggle that had begun soon after the outbreak of World War One. From 1914 onwards, the Miners' Union in Kalgoorlie¹¹ sent numerous appeals to the Minister for Defence, Senator Pearce, requesting the internment of all enemy subjects on the goldfields. By February 1916, all such calls had appeared to go

⁷ Gilchrist, *Australians and Greeks*, p. 23.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 25; *Kalgoorlie Miner*, 11-12 December 1916.

⁹ Yiannakis, 'Kalgoorlie Alchemy', p. 207.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 208.

unheeded and the Kalgoorlie and Boulder miners subsequently resolved not to work with enemy subjects. The Australian Labor Federation (ALF) supported their decision and similar resolutions were taken in other mining centres throughout Western Australia. One report suggested that the Australian miners could not bear being taunted about the recent retreat from Gallipoli.¹² James Cunningham, secretary of the Miners' Union, was quoted as saying that:

The feeling against enemy subjects is practically general throughout the whole of the members ... [and] ... has grown considerably during the past couple of months. Numbers of these men make no secret of their national sympathies when underground, and expressions of disloyalty have frequently been made during crib time, when the newspapers are generally read ... disloyal sentiments expressed were reported by members to have been almost unbearable, more particularly for those who have relatives fighting at the front. The union realises it will be difficult to arrive at who are enemy subjects, as its members have no grievance against members of the Croatian-Slavonian Society who are working on the mines, and who have no sympathy with Austria. They do not desire that any unnecessary hardship should be inflicted upon these men, as evidence of their loyalty is forthcoming in the fact that some twenty of them have joined the Australian Expeditionary Forces.¹³

The day before the ban was due to come into effect, Miners' Union officials met with the Chamber of Mines and the two parties unanimously agreed to make a joint representation to the government regarding the internment of enemy subjects from the mines. Representatives of the two organisations jointly signed a telegram to the Minister of Defence and promised to cooperate with each other in any subsequent investigation of individuals.¹⁴ From 7 February 1916, when the Minister's response was found to be unsatisfactory, the union imposed the ban. A vigilance committee was empowered to question all enemy subjects regarding their citizenship status. If those so challenged could not produce naturalisation papers, the Britisher miners would refuse to work until all unnaturalised enemy subjects had been dismissed.¹⁵ Many of the migrant workers

¹¹ In 1916, the Kalgoorlie and Boulder miners amalgamated into the Federated Mining Employees' Association of Australia. Locally, they were simply referred to as the Miners' Union, until the FMEA merged with the Australian Workers' Union (AWU) in 1917.

¹² *Kalgoorlie Miner*, 9 February 1916.

¹³ *Kalgoorlie Miner*, 29 January 1916.

¹⁴ *Kalgoorlie Miner*, 5 February 1916.

¹⁵ *Kalgoorlie Miner*, 7 February 1916.

affected by the ban chose not to attend work, unwilling to provoke a strike on the mines and, ironically, subsequent reports reflected union approval of the attitude of the enemy nationals who had shown a 'commendable spirit'.¹⁶ The mostly Slav workers were not offered relief payments by the union, despite the fact that many were union members. Instead, union officials deflected responsibility for the growing financial stress suffered by the ousted workers onto the alleged laxity of the Defence Department.¹⁷ Subsequently, the *Miner* reported that many ejected workers were relying on the support of the Slav community and that some families were 'on the verge of starvation'.¹⁸

The Miners' Union decision put the enemy nationals in an impossible position. They were barred from the Kalgoorlie mines and, because of the restrictions imposed by the *War Precautions Act*, were unable to move around freely in search of work elsewhere and were forbidden to leave the country.¹⁹ Even the prospect of receiving internment food and board was withheld, as the government expressed a somewhat uncharacteristic unwillingness to incarcerate this group of miners unless an act of disloyalty could be proven. Such a development was unlikely, explained Captain Corbett from the Defence Department to a mass union meeting, because all the enemy subjects on the fields were known to his Department and were not considered a risk to security.²⁰ This information did not weaken the determination of the Miners' Union and subsequently, the *Westralian Worker*, still under J. Hilton's pro-conscriptionist editorship, commended their resolve, stating that it was 'highly gratifying as evidencing the patriotic feelings and common sense of the community'.²¹ As the effect of the ban on the operation of the mines became more apparent, Kalgoorlie employers tried to get the Miners' Union to rescind its decision. The Chamber of Mines denied ever supporting what it now called the 'precipitate' action of the Miners' Union, a decision that threatened serious economic losses and the continued viability of some mines. Likewise, the Chamber of Commerce expressed the view that the decision had been an

¹⁶ *Kalgoorlie Miner*, 9 February 1916.

¹⁷ *Kalgoorlie Miner*, 14, 30 March 1916.

¹⁸ *Kalgoorlie Miner*, 22 March 1916.

¹⁹ *War Precautions Acts (1914-16) and War Precautions Regulations (1915)*, Official Yearbook of the Commonwealth of Australia 1901-1914, no. 8, Commonwealth Bureau of Statistics, Melbourne, 1915, p. 1093.

²⁰ *Kalgoorlie Miner*, 8 February 1916.

²¹ *Westralian Worker*, 11 February 1916.

error of judgement with serious ramifications for the war effort. To continue the ban, it argued, would turn a mistake into a crime.²²

The mine managers accused the union of pursuing its ‘old stalking horse’, claiming that the anti-Slav campaign was part of a general crusade to remove all non-Britisher migrants from the mines.²³ The *Westralian Worker* unapologetically viewed the campaign in this light, expressing consternation that migrant exclusion was causing any debate. This newspaper also expressed the view that no sympathy should be wasted on the Slavs because ‘[f]rom all accounts the enemy subjects who have in the past been interned showed absolutely no gratitude for the humane treatment they received at the hands of the department.’²⁴ One satirical Letter to the Editor under the pseudonym ‘Tony Dagovich’ purported to be from a hardworking Austrian who had been made unemployed by the Miners’ Union ban. His intention was to get support from the authorities until the end of the war, and then take his savings and go home. Many instances of the common racist stereotyping of migrants were present in this letter – being dishonest, living on the ‘smell of an oily rag’, not spending money in the town, not paying tax and amassing huge savings to take home.²⁵ However, while some individuals undoubtedly agreed that the departure of any non-Britishers was cause for satisfaction, the Miners’ Union did not challenge the presence of other ‘non-enemy’ migrants on the mines, praised the enemy subjects for their cooperation and assisted the mine managers by advertising mine employment through union channels.²⁶ Indeed, it was the union that located a pool of available labour from Meekatharra that could have replaced the excluded workers, but the Chamber of Mines refused to employ them on principle – because the Meekatharra men were on strike at the time.²⁷

²² *Kalgoorlie Miner*, 28 February 1916.

²³ *Kalgoorlie Miner*, 1 March 1916.

²⁴ *Westralian Worker*, 31 March 1916.

²⁵ *Kalgoorlie Miner*, 14 February 1916.

²⁶ *Kalgoorlie Miner*, 8 February 1916.

²⁷ This uncomfortable fact did not stop the editor of a Chamber of Mines publication from categorically stating that ‘[f]or the alarming shortage of labour that the mines of the Golden Mile have experienced this month those who own and control them are in no way to blame; the responsibility for it rests entirely upon the mine workers’ unions.’ Chamber of Mines of Western Australia (Incorporated), *Monthly Journal*, vol. xv, part 1, 29 February 1916, p. 5.

Richard Hamilton, President of the Chamber of Mines, used the dispute to publicly question whether the constant drain of recruiting on the mine workforce, coupled with the Miners' Union campaign, was in the best interests of the war effort. While he was anxious to avoid the impression that he was putting his own sectional interest before the national imperative, he maintained that Kalgoorlie miners were better left to 'do their bit' underground.²⁸ As Fischer pointed out, the mine managers promoted a simple and convenient equation – that production plus profit equalled patriotism.²⁹ In no way could employer support for migrant labour be viewed as evidence of a more racially egalitarian approach. The Chamber of Mines was only too willing to support the 'principle' of Britisher preference, until mine profits were threatened by that policy. Equally, its generally successful portrayal of shovelling and trucking work as fit only for foreigners earning low rates of pay was an obvious boon for company balance sheets. Indeed, while the Miners' Union viewed enemy migrants as the main problem, its ability to wage a united battle against the mine managers was compromised.

While not siding with the mine managers, there were signs that some union members were not as solid on the question of exclusion as their officials might have wished. One observer blamed Messrs. Daw and Bradley, officials of the Miners' Union, for pushing the question of enemy subject exclusion. Bruce McGay, a shop steward for the union, argued that the members would have 'let the matter drop', if not for the incitement of these two men.³⁰ In another Letter to the Editor, 'Britisher', while reflecting a great deal of Empire loyalty, expressed disgust at the effects of the Miners' Union decision. As he continued:

It is indeed hard for me to conceive that a body of Australian working men, claiming to be among the most enlightened people on earth, and whose motto is "Justice for all" can stand calmly by, trying to hide behind the back of the Minister for Defence, while women and children are wanting bread ... Perhaps the war has given some of us the "jumps" ... Don't let it foster in us an ugly spirit of race pride and domination,

²⁸ *Kalgoorlie Miner*, 22 March 1916; Presidential address to the 15th annual general meeting of the Chamber of Mines, reprinted in *Kalgoorlie Miner*, 29 March 1916.

²⁹ G. Fischer, "Enemy Labour": Industrial Unrest and the Internment of Yugoslav Workers in Western Australia during World War I, *The Australian Journal of History and Politics*, vol. 34, no. 1, 1988, p. 11.

³⁰ *Kalgoorlie Miner*, 24 March 1916.

nucleating in that spirit which we condemn in the Prussian mind – megalomania.³¹

Another union member wrote that he was the only man who spoke against the motion to refuse to work with enemy subjects. He argued that many of the men were married to Australian women and were bringing up Australian children. What would be the effect of the union decision, he asked, on the future attitudes towards Australia of people so harshly treated? He felt that unionists should offer friendship to ‘any man who has to earn his living in dirty smoky holes’ and that he felt ‘ashamed to meet men who are suffering by this one-eyed policy of the union’.³² Others had sympathy with his position. A subscription list in support of the women and children affected by the dispute was taken along Burt Street, Boulder, from the Recreation Hotel to the Metropole. In less than thirty minutes, £22/10/- was collected.³³

Of the two hundred enemy subjects prevented from working, the overwhelming majority were shovellers and truckers, a result which clearly demonstrated that the existing division of labour was based upon racist hiring practices. The Chamber of Mines reinforced the ethnic segmentation of the workplace by arguing that to find replacements for the dismissed workers would be difficult, as only foreigners were ‘willing’ to do this type of work.³⁴ Indeed, it argued, the ‘class of work ... is one from which the British mine worker is peculiarly averse. It means steady, hard, physical work, which he either cannot or will not do; in many cases he refuses to attempt it: and, consequently, a foreigner gets the job.’³⁵ As the mine employers saw it, they were often prevented from applying their preference for Britisher labour because:

A number of men are making a practice of applying for work, going below, doing little or nothing, accepting their discharge with cheerfulness, and the next morning making application for work at another mine, where they repeat the same programme with a similar

³¹ *Kalgoorlie Miner*, 25 March 1916.

³² *Kalgoorlie Miner*, 27 March 1916.

³³ *Kalgoorlie Miner*, 30 March 1916

³⁴ *Kalgoorlie Miner*, 9 February 1916.

³⁵ Chamber of Mines of Western Australia (Incorporated), *Monthly Journal*, vol. xv, part 1, 29 February 1916, p. 5.

result, and these tactics, carried out from day to day, enable such men to obtain practically full pay without doing a day's honest work.³⁶

The Miners' Union did send Britisher labourers to take the jobs of the foreigners, but the Chamber of Mines described the new workers as 'both insufficient and inefficient'. Its representatives claimed that Britisher labour was capable of removing less than half the ore that had been shifted by the expert foreigner labour and that the 'slackness' with which the new workers went about their work 'amounted to a 'lazy strike''.³⁷ They explicitly stated that the Britisher labour on offer was 'found to be hopelessly incompetent as compared with the foreign'.³⁸ However, in a Letter to the Editor, one trucker described the appalling working conditions of shovellers and truckers and maintained that the mine managers would have no trouble getting workers if they improved the labour process. He argued that it would not cost very much to properly lay, clean and repair lines to obviate the need for 'a modern Samson to push a truck on them'. He also criticised the inspection system which relied on busy contract miners to check that safe work practices were employed. Bad conditions were not the fault of the foreigners, he reasoned, because many were denied employment elsewhere and were forced to take mine labouring jobs with poor conditions.³⁹

The *Kalgoorlie Miner* attempted to paper over the divisions regarding the employment of enemy subjects on the mines by maintaining that a distinction had to be made between miners of German and Austrian descent and those of the subject nations of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. In this way, the *Miner* could advocate 'universal support' for the bigoted nationalism of the Miners' Union while, at the same time, offering a solution to the mine managers' labour shortage problems.⁴⁰ The *Sun* demonstrated a similar attitude but, in an attempt to deflect the attention of the Miners' Union away from the Slav workers, it suggested that more attention should be paid to

³⁶ *Westralian Worker*, 3 March 1916.

³⁷ Chamber of Mines of Western Australia (Incorporated), *Monthly Journal*, vol. xv, part 1, 29 February 1916, p. 7.

³⁸ 'Alien Enemies Commission', The Chamber of Mines of W.A. (Incpd.), Kalgoorlie, 31 October 1916, pamphlet held in the National Library of Australia.

³⁹ *Kalgoorlie Miner*, 14 February 1916.

⁴⁰ *Kalgoorlie Miner*, 25 March 1916.

the Germans – both naturalised and unnaturalised – who lived on the goldfields.⁴¹ When the question of working with ‘enemy subjects’ was reviewed by the Miners’ Union at the end of March, several speakers argued that the current course of action was indefensible. Their view was not widely shared; the majority position was to continue the ban.⁴²

While the ‘grassroots’ activities of the Miners’ Union and the returned soldiers became the public face of racism in Kalgoorlie, the events of 1916 must be seen in the context of wartime xenophobia, Government attacks on hapless migrants throughout the country, and a racist media frenzy sustained by both labour movement and conservative newspapers. The Prime Minister, W. M. Hughes, had, for some time, been leading a vicious campaign against the IWW, branding their migrant members as ‘German agents’ and denouncing Wobbly internationalism as a foreign and seditious ideology. Under the auspices of the *War Precautions Acts 1914-16* and its accompanying set of regulations, ‘enemy subjects’ were removed from the share listings of Australian companies and land transfers to them were blocked.⁴³ Both Federal and State Governments, as exemplars of the ‘loyal’ employer, placed restrictions on enemy nationals gaining public service employment.⁴⁴ Under the *Aliens Restriction Order 1915*, ‘enemy aliens’ and naturalised subjects of enemy origin were forbidden to change their names without permission. In one example of such repression, a naturalised hairdresser by the name of Baur, was fined £15 plus costs for operating under a trade name, rather than his own surname.⁴⁵ Similar measures included the banning of the sale of goods produced in enemy countries and encouraging proprietary clubs to suspend the membership of any enemy subject – naturalised or otherwise.⁴⁶ As McKernan described the situation, the

⁴¹ *The Sun*, 5 March 1916.

⁴² *Kalgoorlie Miner*, 1 April 1916

⁴³ *The War Precautions (Land Transfer) Regulations (1916)* and *The War Precautions (Enemy Shareholders) Regulations (1916)* cited in *Official Yearbook of the Commonwealth of Australia*, no. 9, Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics, Melbourne, 1916, p. 1004.

⁴⁴ Oliver, *War and Peace*, p. 64, 70. See also E. Scott, *Australia During the War*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1936, pp. 112-3.

⁴⁵ This is probably a misspelling of the more common ‘Bauer’. *Kalgoorlie Miner*, 9 February 1916; *Official Yearbook of the Commonwealth of Australia*, no. 11, Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics, Melbourne, 1918, p. 1040.

⁴⁶ *Commonwealth of Australia Gazette*, 12 January 1916, pp. 39-51; *Official Yearbook of the Commonwealth of Australia*, no. 11, Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics, Melbourne, 1918, p. 1042.

scapegoating of such migrants was an integral part of ‘manufacturing the war’ on the homefront.⁴⁷

In Western Australia, internment of enemy nationals was carried out with extraordinary zeal and, at a local level, the *Kalgoorlie Miner* was not slow to whip up racial hatred against the Empire’s enemies.⁴⁸ Its editorials raised the spectre of ‘foul deeds’ perpetrated by enemy subjects, categorically stating that the ‘Teutonic nature’ could not be trusted. In one article, it cited an unidentified ‘expert’ who described German manners as ‘beastly’ and claimed that mendacity was taught in German schools as being clever and virtuous. Even those who had become naturalised were suspect, claimed the *Miner*, arguing that ‘when the crucial hour of trial comes, the microbe of Kaiserism which has been growing and asserting itself for centuries may outweigh all previous resolves’.⁴⁹ In response to German newspaper reports decrying the use of asphyxiating gas in warfare, the *Miner* leaped to the defence of the British and their allies. One editorial hypocritically argued that:

The Germans may lawfully torture and kill their enemies with ... poison gas; but when the allies are forced to retaliate in kind, they are guilty of a breach of the Hague Convention. Vainglorious racial arrogance ... when exalted into a creed, with a thousand material interests based on it and backed by great armies to further its fanatical teachings ... becomes a dangerous mania. [W]hen with a crazy belief in their divine mission, they regard themselves as superior to all obligations of morality and law; when they trample upon the rights and ideals of every other people, and would make all other nations subservient to their good pleasure; then they become a pestilential danger and must be suppressed at all costs.⁵⁰

No kettle had ever been denigrated by a blacker pot! In such a heightened atmosphere, it may have behoved the *Kalgoorlie Miner*’s editor to exercise some journalistic restraint. However, this was not to be the case – Gilchrist blamed the *Kalgoorlie Miner*’s impassioned editorial regarding the German sympathies of the

⁴⁷ M. McKernan, *The Australian People and the Great War*, Thomas Nelson Australia, West Melbourne, 1980, pp. 150-177.

⁴⁸ Oliver, *War and Peace*, p. 64. For a personal account of the period by an internee from Western Australia, see A. Splivalo, *The Home Fires*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Fremantle, 1982.

⁴⁹ *Kalgoorlie Miner*, 23 March 1916. For similar editorial messages, see *Kalgoorlie Miner*, 16 August 1916.

⁵⁰ *Kalgoorlie Miner*, 7 July 1919.

Greek King Constantine for the ensuing torrent of racist violence against local Greek businesses.⁵¹ Indeed, after the riots had subsided, the *Miner* report contained a Machiavellian disclaimer that no-one could have possibly ‘imagined for one moment that it would resolve itself into an affair of huge proportions’.⁵²

Towards the end of August, the campaign against the migrants took a new turn. Until then, the Miners’ Union had refused all entreaties from the Federal and State Governments and from the Chamber of Mines to make a distinction between loyal and disloyal enemy subjects.⁵³ When some mine managers began to re-employ Slav workers, 2,700 miners walked off the job. Predictably, once production had stopped, more serious attempts to resolve the dispute took place.⁵⁴ The Minister for Mines, R. T. Robinson, proposed that a five-member Royal Commission be established to investigate each of the workers to whom the Miners’ Union objected, in order to determine which of them were enemy aliens. The suggestion was acceptable to the Federal Government, the Chamber of Mines and a mass meeting of unionists. Mr J. Darbyshire, a supervising engineer on the Trans-Australian Line, was designated chairman.⁵⁵ Other men appointed to the Commission were Lloyd Bloxsome and R. Varden, representing the Chamber of Mines, alongside George Callanan and J. Cunningham, MLC, representing the Miners’ Union. During nineteen days of hearings, the Commission examined the status of 138 people, hearing nineteen witnesses in the process. In all, thirty-three men were classified as ‘enemy aliens’ and were subsequently interned. The Miners’ Union representatives issued a minority report, stating that, in their view, only two of the men were not alien enemies. For their part, the employer representatives issued an addendum stating that, in eight cases, they did not feel that sufficient evidence had been presented to warrant the men’s exclusion from the mining industry. They felt that some witnesses had made vexatious accusations that were ‘prompted by other than disinterested patriotic motives’.⁵⁶

⁵¹ Gilchrist, *Australians and Greeks*, p. 23.

⁵² *Kalgoorlie Miner*, 11 December 1919.

⁵³ A loyal enemy subject was any migrant from an area forcibly incorporated into the Austrian Empire.

⁵⁴ *Kalgoorlie Miner*, 25, 29 August 1916.

⁵⁵ *Kalgoorlie Miner*, 1 September 1916.

⁵⁶ *Kalgoorlie Miner*, 3 November 1916.

As a device to get the miners back to work, the Royal Commission was a complete success. The investigation allowed the re-employment of most of the banned workers and, at the same time, reinforced the Government's policy regarding the persecution of 'enemy subjects'. Kalgoorlie was to be racked by race rioting on two further occasions. However, while in each of these riots, returned soldiers demonstrated their continued commitment to an 'ethnically-cleansed' Kalgoorlie, the labour movement was to display a far more tractable attitude to migrant labour in the 1919 and 1934 events. Small signs of opposition to migrant exclusion were isolated in 1916, but in later riots they became official union policy.

The 1919 Kalgoorlie race riots

In 1919, there was a considerable level of street violence in Australia, as returned soldiers expressed their dissatisfaction regarding the political and industrial situation they found at home.⁵⁷ Migrant workers who were deemed to be taking returned soldier jobs particularly angered them. In one such incident in Kalgoorlie, a 22 year old returned soldier, Thomas Northwood, was fatally stabbed in an altercation with an Italian man. A bell-ringer was sent through the streets to summon a general roll-up of returned soldiers.⁵⁸ Although Northwood and his companions had instigated the altercation, returned servicemen led riots against southern Europeans. They organised a march of townspeople to various Italian-owned businesses in the area, which were ransacked one by one. The protesters demanded that all non-Britishers be ejected from the goldfields in order to ensure that sufficient jobs would await those returning from military service. Single Italian men were given an ultimatum to leave the town or face ejection and, as a result, many migrants fled.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ See, for example, D. Hood, 'Adelaide's First 'Taste of Bolshevism': Returned Soldiers and the 1918 Peace Day Riots', *Journal of the Historical Society of South Australia*, no. 15, 1987; D. W. Rawson, 'Political Violence in Australia', parts 1 and 2, *Dissent*, Autumn and Spring 1968. See also Thomson's summary of the Melbourne Peace Day riot and the anti-Bolshevik riots in Brisbane in A. Thomson, *Anzac Memories*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1996, p. 17.

⁵⁸ *West Australian*, 13 August 1919.

⁵⁹ *Kalgoorlie Miner*, 13 August 1919; *West Australian*, 13, 15 August 1919; Murray, 'The Kalgoorlie Woodline Strikes', p. 25; Oliver, *War and Peace*, pp. 156-7.

These riots had industrial ramifications. While some returned soldiers had gravitated towards the newly-formed Nationalist union on the goldfields, the Federated Miners Union (FMU), most Kalgoorlie returned soldiers supported the Australian Workers' Union (AWU).⁶⁰ The AWU, allied with the Official Labor Party, recruited returned servicemen and anti-conscriptionists alike.⁶¹ As Murray has argued, a 'clash of interest definitely existed' with two key issues at the centre of the struggle.⁶² Firstly, the FMU demanded preference for returned soldiers, while the AWU sought preference for its members and recognition as the sole representative of mine labour. Secondly, the AWU leadership was prepared, albeit in a half-hearted fashion, to support the mostly migrant woodline workers who were, at this time, engaged in an industrial campaign for better wages and conditions.⁶³ The FMU opposed migrants having jobs, especially while returned servicemen were unemployed. Although many miners would have experienced little contradiction between membership of both groups, for some within the AWU, the question of southern European labour raised competing political priorities between the poles of migrant exclusion and working class internationalism.

The RSL and the FMU had an overlapping membership. As has been demonstrated in Chapter Three, the RSL's allegiance to a homogeneous 'white' society prompted repeated calls for migrant exclusion. Moreover, its headquarters in Kalgoorlie became a focal point for anti-labour campaign coordination. Unlike some other returned service organisations and other sub-branches of the nationally-recognised RSL, where

⁶⁰ At the time of the 1919 strike against non-union labour on the mines, it was reported that only seven returned men were not members of the AWU. However, W. Howell, acting secretary of the FMU (Boulder Branch) stated that its membership totalled more than three hundred, and of this number, over fifty were returned soldiers. *Westralian Worker*, 28 November 1919; *Kalgoorlie Miner*, 13 November 1919.

⁶¹ It should be noted that, between these antagonistic political positions, were many who stood somewhere between the two poles. For example, Alf Wilson, a propagandist for the OBU, indicated that he knew an RSL member who was in sympathy with the OBU, but who 'was compelled for certain privileges to remain with those who fought and thought the country was theirs.' See extracts from A. Wilson, 'All for the Cause, being the experiences of a socialist propagandist', *Labour History*, no. 65, 1993. See also A. Reeves, 'Yours 'til the war of classes is ended': OBU Organisers on Western Australian Eastern Goldfields', *Labour History*, no. 65, 1993.

⁶² Murray, 'The Kalgoorlie Woodline Strikes', p. 27.

⁶³ Woodline workers or wood cutters produced the timber that was used for mine construction and safety. Whenever the woodline workers engaged in a strike of any duration, the mines ceased operation. For an evocative account of life on the woodline, see B. Bunbury, *Timber for Gold*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Fremantle, 1997.

attitudes towards the labour movement were initially something of a contested issue,⁶⁴ the Kalgoorlie sub-branch was, from the start, an anti-Labor force. Its often violent actions were officially sanctioned by the police, the conservative press, the government and the employers. When the Kalgoorlie RSL members indicated their determination to get Italians off the mines, the Police Commissioner in Perth cryptically advocated 'lawful compulsion' to get the Italians to leave.⁶⁵ At an RSL meeting held to discuss the Northwood stabbing, the Resident Magistrate of Kalgoorlie, Mr Walter, sympathised with the returned soldiers' desire to get Italians off the goldfields, but cautioned them to use 'constitutional methods'. Whilst threatening to oust all Italian men, Kalgoorlie RSL executive members, H. Axford and W. Schwann, urged that such expulsions should be carried out by 'peaceful means'. Members should try to avoid damaging the property of Australians, they conscientiously advised.⁶⁶ When the riot erupted, the President of the Kalgoorlie RSL was in Perth. He cabled the following message to his Secretary: 'Wire me particulars of trouble with foreigners. Hold men in hand. Help police to trace culprit. Use no unlawful means.' Despite the almost immediate arrest of the man who had stabbed Northwood, the reply sent by the Secretary suggested that the executive endorsed the membership's actions. The message read: 'Returned soldiers moved all foreigners leave Goldfields by Saturday night or be deported. Rank and file have position in hand. Hell itself will not bluff them. Don't worry.'⁶⁷

The General Secretary of the Western Australian RSL advised the Kalgoorlie sub-branch that representations had been made to the Government to legitimise the deportations and that the police had been told to advise the Italians to put as much distance as possible between themselves and Kalgoorlie. He passed on assurances that special constables were only being recruited to protect private property and the well-being of citizens, not to 'protect the Italians in any way'. 'I may state', he wrote, 'that

⁶⁴ Those who fought within the RSL for more radical demands were frequently ostracised from the nationally-recognised organisation. See, for example, B. Oliver, 'The Diggers' Association': A turning point in the history of the Western Australian Returned Services League', *Journal of the Australian War Memorial*, no. 23, 1993 and, in the post-World War Two context, L. J. Louis, 'The RSL and the Cold War 1946-50', *Labour History*, no. 74, 1998.

⁶⁵ Oliver, *War and Peace*, pp. 156-60.

⁶⁶ *Kalgoorlie Miner*, 13 August 1919.

⁶⁷ *West Australian*, 13, 15 August 1919.

the Ministers and the Commissioner of Police are sympathising with us in this matter.’⁶⁸ Returned soldiers in Brisbane responded by sending a congratulatory telegram to their Western Australian counterparts, complimenting the Kalgoorlie men on ‘the workmanlike manner in which they acted’ to expel the Italians.⁶⁹

While some miners followed the lead provided by the RSL, the AWU leadership denounced the rioting and subsequent moves to deport Italians from the goldfields. The Mining Division held a meeting in the aftermath of the riots and promised solidarity to all those foreigners and their families who were union members. The delegates also passed resolutions attacking the government for its failure to protect citizens and demanded measures to prevent further harassment and deportations from the fields. The resolution put before the meeting stated:

[t]hat we enter an emphatic protest to the Government for the spineless manner in which they have acted in not providing protection for citizens of this community, and that we advise the government to withdraw immediately the instructions given for the Italians to leave the district.⁷⁰

AWU officials promised that union ‘vigilance committees’ would be formed for the protection of unionists. They also protested against the deportation of Louis Francis, accused of being a Communist by the RSL, and demanded that those who had forced him to leave town should be prosecuted.⁷¹

Murray has argued that the AWU leadership took up the cause of the migrant workers in order to build the union’s membership and, in the process, strengthen its case for sole representation of mine labour against that of the FMU. While she indicated that the resolutions supporting the woodline workers must have been supported by the majority of officials and delegates who voted for them,⁷² there were clearly mixed feelings among those who voted. The motions were passed ‘emphatically’ while the

⁶⁸ *West Australian*, 15 August 1919.

⁶⁹ *West Australian*, 21 August 1919.

⁷⁰ *Westralian Worker*, 22 August 1919.

⁷¹ Vanderwiel, *The Goldfield Riot of August 1919*, pp. 12-16.

⁷² Murray, ‘The Kalgoorlie Woodline Strikes’, p. 30.

miners reportedly ‘possessed no greater liking for the foreigners than anyone else’.⁷³ The wording of an Intelligence report sent to Melbourne in the aftermath of the dispute also suggested pragmatism on the part of the AWU. It read:

The A.W.U. (Miners’ Union) had vigorously protested against the “deportation” of Louis Francis and had *threatened to side with the Italians* if the soldiers tried to forcibly expel them from Kalgoorlie. They also advised the Italians to resist the pressure put on them to go away. Their action however was dictated not so much by any regard for the welfare of the Italian as by a hatred of the returned soldier ... [my emphasis]⁷⁴

Most local newspapers consistently fanned enmity between Britisher and migrant workers – distancing themselves from support for the riot but openly sympathising with the claims of the returned soldiers. For instance, before the riot, one newspaper exhorted the State government to scab on the woodline workers because, instead of paying relief to miners thrown out of work by the dispute, it would be cheaper for the government to ‘haul the wood for nothing’.⁷⁵ After the riot, the same newspaper argued for the expulsion of the Italians. Its editor lamented that ‘[t]he fate of the community ... depends on the goodwill of the Dagoes’, maintaining that ‘while the Italians remain on the goldfields they render the preservation of conditions of peace impossible’.⁷⁶

Later that year, AWU miners struck to get non-AWU labour (specifically, ‘bogus’ unionists in the FMU) out of the mines and serious scuffles between the rival groups took place at several shaft heads.⁷⁷ Again, a bell-ringer was sent out into the streets to advise all returned soldiers to meet at RSL headquarters.⁷⁸ In this way, the police galvanised opposition to AWU militancy, forming a force of ‘special constables’ with returned servicemen prominent in its ranks. Indeed, these police reinforcements

⁷³ *Westralian Worker*, 22 August 1919.

⁷⁴ The Italian Aliens on the Kalgoorlie Goldfields, report dated 18 November 1919, Australian Federal Police, Western Division, Intelligence Section, NAA: PP14/1, 16/1/290.

⁷⁵ *The Sun*, 3 August 1919.

⁷⁶ *The Sun*, 17 August 1919.

⁷⁷ For a detailed account of these altercations, see B. Oliver, *Arrested in their beds at Midnight: An account and analysis of the events at Fimiston, 6 November 1919 and their aftermath*, unpublished paper presented to the Australian Historical Association conference, University of Sydney, 7 July 1998.

⁷⁸ *The Sun*, 9 November 1919.

were sworn in at the Soldiers' Institute, not at the police station.⁷⁹ There was no doubting which group had the support of the Chamber of Mines. Its report stated:

Like a fiery cross the news of the happenings on the mines was carried through Boulder and Kalgoorlie exciting ... the righteous rage of returned soldiers. Comrades ... had been wounded, not on the field of battle ... but in pursuit of their lawful avocations by degenerates among their countrymen. The tocsin sounded in the streets of Kalgoorlie, calling the returned men to enrol to safeguard the interests of themselves and the community threatened by a lawless mob.⁸⁰

Not all returned servicemen answered the conservative call. One argued that the RSL executive was 'reactionary and unrepresentative' and that it was 'one of the channels through which the Chamber [of Mines] hopes to sail to a complete victory'.⁸¹ A Boulder meeting of returned soldiers censured the Kalgoorlie RSL executive for 'fighting the battle of the Chamber of Mines and acting in a manner which is detrimental to the best interests of ourselves as workers' and passed a motion that returned soldier workers should 'link up with the AWU'.⁸² This evidence supports McQueen's distinction between the two sub-branches. He argued that the Kalgoorlie sub-branch was more representative of, and controlled by, its extensive commercial and management constituency, whereas the Boulder sub-branch had a far higher concentration of proletarian members – 'in other words, it was a class division' that separated the attitudes of the two groups.⁸³ While the Chamber of Mines refused to grant preference to either the AWU or the FMU, it was content to encourage the strike breakers and to portray itself as champions of employment impartiality. It claimed that members endorsed the policy of preferential hiring of Britishers, with the proviso of 'all

⁷⁹ Murray, 'The Kalgoorlie Woodline Strikes', p. 27. Jack Coleman remembered his father's participation in union meetings at the time. He said, 'The trouble was then that the companies were trying to form a company union called the Coolgardie Miners' Union and the ... AWU ... were opposing it very strenuously to the extent that ... you realise this is 1919. They were just returned boys from the First World War. Strangely enough, the Boulder RSL wouldn't be in any activity to take a stand against the miners but they marched them out from Kalgoorlie RSL.' Interview with *Jack Coleman*, conducted by Stuart Reid on 19 September 1988, Battye Library ref. no. OH2062.

⁸⁰ Chamber of Mines of Western Australia (Incorporated), *Monthly Journal*, vol. xviii, parts x, xi, xii, 31 December 1919, p. 124.

⁸¹ *Westralian Worker*, 14 November 1919.

⁸² *The Sun*, 9 November 1919; *West Australian*, 8 November 1919. A. H. Panton, Labor MLC and member of the Kalgoorlie RSL executive, stated that his fellow executive members had overstepped the mark by intervening in an industrial dispute and that the majority of returned soldiers supported the AWU.

⁸³ McQueen, *Gallipoli to Petrov*, p. 214.

things being equal'. In reality, this policy expressed preference for the cheapest, most unorganised labour. Richard Hamilton, President of the Chamber of Mines, argued that AWU intolerance of the Nationalist union would drive away capital and turn Kalgoorlie into another Broken Hill.⁸⁴

The strike ended without the main issue fully settled – the FMU continued to exist as little more than a rump and considerable enmity between supporters of the FMU and the AWU remained a feature of the Kalgoorlie industrial landscape for many years. The mine employers strengthened their bargaining position against the AWU by encouraging racial division. A few days of lost production was worth little in comparison to the opportunity to manufacture a workforce permanently divided on the basis that the foreigner was the enemy, not the employer. In this campaign, conservative RSL members became useful allies, because the migrant presence on the mines challenged the ideals for which they believed they had fought, 'race loyalty' being high on their list of priorities. The anti-Labor returned soldiers could sow racial division among Kalgoorlie workers, but they did not have the social power to effectively remove foreigners from the mines. Nevertheless, their propaganda encouraged the alienation of southern Europeans from their Britisher counterparts, without preventing their employment. While the attitude of organised workers towards migrant labour was still somewhat grudging in 1919, a distinct shift from the politics of the 1916 campaign can be discerned. No longer did organised miners deny the right of 'foreigners' to a job; instead, they offered a range of support mechanisms to all those who were members of the union, in an albeit selfish recognition that solidarity would offer industrial benefits.

At the very least, the dispute highlighted to AWU members that RSL policy was anathema to their industrial interests. Returned soldier scapegoating of migrants as 'imagined' competitors for jobs could not disguise the very real 'scabbery' of the FMU. Together with the clear relationship between the RSL and the Chamber of Mines, particularly in the recruitment of special constables, such an industrial outlook rang warning bells for many AWU members. The AWU expelled any members who had

⁸⁴ Chamber of Mines of Western Australia (Incorporated), *Monthly Journal*, vol. xviii, parts x, xi, xii, 31 December 1919, p. 123.

been special constables in 1919 and, even in 1928, Labor officials were still investigating charges that certain persons had ‘served’ in this capacity.⁸⁵ As Justina Williams recalled:

With the resumption of work ... there was no diminution of hostility towards the “special bastards” as the scabs were called. Their lives were made such a misery that many of them left the industry. Hatred of the Coolgardie Union was long handed down among workers on the Golden Mile.⁸⁶

The 1934 Kalgoorlie/Boulder race riots

Fifteen years later, a third riot erupted against southern European migrants in Kalgoorlie. During the Australia Day weekend of 1934, an inebriated Britisher miner, Edward Jordan, instigated a fight with an Italian barman, Claudio Mattaboni, outside the Home from Home Hotel where Mattaboni was employed.⁸⁷ The two men were well known to each other and the fight appeared to be Jordan’s attempt to settle a minor dispute over a cracked window in the bar. In the course of the ensuing scuffle, Jordan fell and cracked his skull on the pavement and died several hours later in hospital. Afterwards, even his friends described Jordan as ‘a good man sober but very different with the drink in him’.⁸⁸ Justina Williams, who knew Jordan well, thought him ‘a fine type of worker ... popular and a fine sportsman’. Given Williams’ commitment to anti-racism, it is unlikely that she would have described him in this way if Jordan had been an habitual racist towards migrants.⁸⁹

However, Jordan’s drinking partners, Dillon and Martin, were not prepared to let the tragic incident rest. They spread rumours that the popular firefighter and tributer had been murdered by Mattaboni. Jordan’s funeral was attended by hundreds of ‘mourners’.

⁸⁵ *Westralian Worker*, 14 November 1919; Bertola, *Ethnic Difference in Kalgoorlie*, p. 31.

⁸⁶ Williams, *The First Furrow*, p. 81.

⁸⁷ For detailed descriptions of the riots, see the references listed in Footnote 4. See also file of correspondence, claims for damages, newspaper clippings etc. in connection with riots. Boulder Police Station records, acc. no. 430, item no. 700, State Records Office of Western Australia.

⁸⁸ Bunbury, *Reading Labels on Jam Tins*, p. 108.

⁸⁹ Williams, *The First Furrow*, p. 143.

One local resident, Nancy Crisp, described her sister's impression of the funeral procession which accompanied Jordan's coffin.

I'm not suggesting that there wasn't the usual grief and sorrow amongst his own family and friends but ... Norah told us when she came home that the cars going along at the tail end of this cortege were [full of] sightseers and almost merrymakers and she was rather disgusted about it.⁹⁰

Many of these 'merrymakers' went from Jordan's funeral to a number of wakes being held in local hotels.⁹¹ In the evening, a crowd began to gather in Hannan Street outside several migrant-owned businesses. A youth threw a stone through a window of the Italian-owned Kalgoorlie Wine Saloon. After looting much of the hotel's contents, rioters burned the building to the ground. Subsequently, several other migrant-run establishments suffered the same fate. A large group of rioters then 'commandeered' a tram and rode to the nearby town of Boulder, where the destruction continued.

In the morning, meetings were held at several pit-heads, where it was resolved that the miners would not work until unnaturalised miners were ejected from their jobs. In Boulder, side-stepping the AWU leadership which did not support the idea of striking, a street meeting was organised from the back of a lorry. One reporter described how several speakers 'harangued' the crowd of approximately three hundred people to elect a committee of representatives from each of the principal mines to demand the dismissal of all foreigners, regardless of their naturalisation status. The selection process for this committee was rather informal. Someone in the crowd would shout out their nomination. 'Let's have a look at him' was the response. After some nominations were voted down, seven men were selected.⁹² A photograph showing six members of the Unofficial Miners' Committee appeared in the *West Australian*, listing their names as H. B. Charteris, R. Fletcher, J. J. Baker, M. Gilbert, J. Thomas and T. Brozam.⁹³ While

⁹⁰ Interview with Nancy and Jack Crisp for 'A Bad Blue' (The 1934 Kalgoorlie Riots) ABC Social History Radio feature, 1986, producer Bill Bunbury, Battye Library ref no. OH1396.

⁹¹ D. Casey-Congdon, *Casey's Wife*, Artlook Books, Perth, 1982, p. 112.

⁹² *Sunday Times*, 4 February 1934.

⁹³ *West Australian*, 31 January 1934. J. J. Baker is the man featured third from the left, not M. Gilbert as noted in the *West Australian*. This information was relayed by John Terrell from the recollections of his father-in-law, Alan Deas, who knew Baker. Letter to author, 21 August 2000.

very little is known of these men, we might assume from the method of their selection that they were representative of the cross-section of views present at the meeting and were united on the need for migrant exclusion. Their selection also suggests that they were known in the town, although not necessarily as mine workers, as the name of their committee suggested. Certainly, Bob Fletcher worked as a pipe fitter on the Ivanhoe Mine, was shop steward for the AWU and a Labor member on the Boulder Council.⁹⁴ Likewise, Joe Thomas was described by the Premier of the day, Phillip Collier, as ‘an out and out red ragger of the very worst type’ and was later blacklisted from the mines on Collier’s express recommendation.⁹⁵ However, J. J. Baker was a champion cyclist, sports commentator and promoter. Postal records describe him as a hawker from Kurrawang.⁹⁶ Harry Charteris appears to have lived in Kalgoorlie only during 1934, and his attire in the photograph does not suggest that of a working miner. Indeed, his medical records imply that he spent most of the interwar years in the merchant navy, while his wife, Angelina, resided in Perth.⁹⁷ At least two of the group, Joe Thomas and Harry Charteris, were returned soldiers.

When the rioting broke out, the local branch of the CPA produced a leaflet which argued that migrant workers were not the enemy. Members spoke at the daily miners’ meetings to argue for international solidarity.⁹⁸ Bronc Finlay recalled that members spoke in favour of turning the strike into a campaign against the mine managers for better wages for all the miners, although Ted Docker, a leading CPA

⁹⁴ Interview with *Robert Fletcher*, conducted by Stuart Reid on 27 July 1988, Battye Library ref no. OH2054.

⁹⁵ See Gerritsen, ‘The 1934 Kalgoorlie Riots’, p. 75. If Collier’s ‘red-ragger’ reference meant that Thomas was a member of the CPA, this makes the ideological mix of the committee even more remarkable, given that the local branch of the CPA actively opposed the riots. It seems more likely that Thomas was a ‘fellow traveller’. Justina Williams did not recall mention of his name among the many interviews she undertook. Letter to author, 23 September 2000.

⁹⁶ Alan Deas described Baker as ‘a good talker and very friendly person, who soon fitted in very well’. Letter to author, 21 August 2000. See also newspaper description of Baker as ‘well-known in the cycling world of Kalgoorlie and as a broadcast speaker from 6KG’, *Sunday Times*, 6 January 1935; Western Australian Post Office records, William Grundt Library, Kalgoorlie.

⁹⁷ Charteris’ service record indicates that he was born in India of British parents, enlisted in Melbourne in 1915 and served in Egypt and France. Due to a family matter, he deserted in 1918 and was court-martialled and discharged from the army in 1920. See H. Charteris, service no. 3073, World War One Personnel Records, National Archives of Australia, Canberra; Department of Veterans’ Affairs (DVA), Medical Records file no. 31576, held at DVA, Perth office. I am indebted to Victor Oates, DVA, Canberra, for this information. Also see Western Australian Post Office records, William Grundt Library, Kalgoorlie.

member, later reported that attempts to quell the ‘misdirected’ campaign were howled down by the crowd.⁹⁹ Later that day, a meeting was called by AWU officials and Labor parliamentarians in an attempt to end the strike. It was an open-air, rowdy affair and not restricted to union members. When explosions were heard coming from Boulder’s predominantly southern European residential area, known locally as Dingbat Flat, the rioting flared for a second time and migrant residences became the mob’s main target. Two men were killed in the ensuing battle – Charles Stokes, a young Britisher rioter, and Joseph Katich, a migrant miner. Many residents of the Flat were forced to hide in the surrounding bushland.

Although the rioting ceased that night, it took several days of meetings and negotiations to end the strike. The Chamber of Mines insisted that they followed a policy of Britisher preference, but would not consider removing southern Europeans from their jobs as such a move would create an untenable labour shortage.¹⁰⁰ They also refused to grant an AWU delegation’s request for employment preference to AWU members as a resolution to the dispute. One newspaper reported that the Chamber of Mines ‘would not relent, even when it was pointed out that, from 1898 to 1919, when preference to unionists had been the rule, there had been no serious industrial dispute on the Golden Mile’.¹⁰¹ Mr J. Lynch, President of the Eastern Goldfields Tributaries Association, was quoted, in the same edition, as saying that the AWU executive had let the membership fall to the point where members were forced ‘to take things from the Chamber lying down’. At a subsequent Mining Division meeting, Mr J. Cunningham, MLA, reminded the members that they had not won preference in the 1919 dispute and, in his opinion, they would not do so again. He argued that the union could not afford a dispute on the question and that the proper place for gaining employment preference was through the arbitral system.¹⁰² By the end of the week, the miners agreed to go back

⁹⁸ Interview with *Jack Coleman*; Interview with *Bronc Finlay*, conducted by Stuart Reid on 16 November 1988, Battye Library ref no. OH2071; Williams, *The First Furrow*, pp. 144-5.

⁹⁹ Interview with *Bronc Finlay*. See also *Communist Review*, June 1934, p. 15.

¹⁰⁰ Ironically, in some quarters, this stance was portrayed as a principled position. In one mining periodical, the editor argued that: ‘[i]n declining to be bullied by barbarianism, unblushing and undisguised, into becoming tools of barbarians and sanctioning causes of tyranny and injustice, the Chamber of Mines has done something real in the way of cleansing and defending the reputation of State.’ *Industrial Australian and Mining Standard*, 15 February 1934.

¹⁰¹ *Goldfields Observer*, 4 February 1934

¹⁰² *West Australian*, 5 February 1934.

to work on the AWU officials' assurances that an English language test would be more carefully administered to migrant workers.¹⁰³

In time, eighty-six people were arrested on a variety of charges in connection with the riots – twenty-two charges of stealing, fifty-five for unlawful possession, four for vagrancy, seventeen for rioting (one absconded from bail) and four for possession of unlicensed firearms. The police were able to secure eighty-three convictions and fourteen men received gaol sentences.¹⁰⁴ Eight of those charged with rioting were found guilty. The arrest records indicate that the riot participants had a wide range of occupations and that there was a preponderance of young men among those charged.¹⁰⁵ The records do not, however, support the common contention that the rioters were predominantly miners.¹⁰⁶ Alongside the thirty-seven miners who were charged were listed several women domestics, a housewife, two building contractors, an upholsterer, a billiard marker, a salesman, a clerk, a gardener, a storekeeper and a 73-year old hawker named Juma Khan. Volet has argued that some rioters who were listed by police as miners, could have been more accurately described as itinerant workers. He cited the example of one unemployed man whose last job had been in railway line construction.¹⁰⁷ Similarly, James Bursill was described by police as a miner, but, in court, gave his occupation as 'barman'.¹⁰⁸

At the inquest into their friend's death, Dillon and Martin were prepared to perjure themselves to the effect that Mataboni had thrown stones at Jordan and had hit him with a large object which, unfortunately for their credibility, they could not describe. Mataboni's defence lawyer, Eric Heenan, deduced that Jordan's friends had deliberately inflamed the rioters.¹⁰⁹ Mataboni was subsequently charged with the manslaughter of Jordan, but was acquitted.¹¹⁰ Upon Heenan's death in 1998, his son

¹⁰³ *Kalgoorlie Miner*, 5 February 1934.

¹⁰⁴ Return of arrests and charges and results in connection with the Kalgoorlie Riots, 19 February 1934, Police file, acc. no. 430, item no. 700, State Records Office of Western Australia.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.* Police records show that the vast majority were under the age of 30.

¹⁰⁶ See Gerritsen's comment that '[a] familiar refrain around Kalgoorlie when the riots are mentioned is, "it all started on the mines".' Gerritsen, 'The 1934 Kalgoorlie Riots', p. 57.

¹⁰⁷ Volet, 'Some of the Reasons', p. 110.

¹⁰⁸ *Kalgoorlie Miner*, 16, 24 March 1934.

¹⁰⁹ *Goldfields Observer*, 18 February 1934.

¹¹⁰ *Kalgoorlie Miner*, 16 March 1934.

remarked that most people in Kalgoorlie had opposed the riots and supported his father's defence of Mattaboni. Certainly, acting for the Italian man did not appear to harm Heenan's electoral fortunes. Two years after Mattaboni's trial, he was elected as a Labor member of the Western Australian Upper House and held his seat for 32 years.¹¹¹ Heenan's principled decision to represent Mattaboni stood in stark contrast to the actions of Felix Cowle, solicitor and close associate of the Chamber of Mines, who was offered the case but refused to act in Mattaboni's defence. While Mattaboni remained in gaol, cowardly Cowle wrote to his wife that, despite being joint proprietor of the Home from Home Hotel,¹¹² he had 'promptly retired from all connection with "Charlie" [Mattaboni]. His reasoning was that 'the crowd ... are so irresponsible that it only needs some woman to cry out "That's Cowle's shop; he's appearing for the murderer; down with all Dago sympathisers" & a bur-bottle would be through my £50 plate glass window in half-a-minute'.¹¹³ Ironically, Cowle, an outspoken conscriptionist, had acted as counsel for the Slav miners at the Alien Enemies Commission in 1916. Clearly, fulfilling the wishes of the Chamber of Mines inspired in him a greater sense of duty.¹¹⁴

What role for the RSL in 1934?

Although diffuse, snippets of evidence suggest that the RSL played a practical and ideological role during the 1934 rioting. Further, the 1934 outburst sheds light on Kristianson's argument that the tactics of the League have always been subject to internal dispute, with one section endorsing 'respectability' and 'responsibility' and the other advocating more militant, and sometimes violent, agitation.¹¹⁵ Indeed, the secrecy surrounding those involved in the riots, in many senses, suited a 'respectable' RSL leadership that pontificated about the violence, but surreptitiously supported the methods and objectives of the rioters.

¹¹¹ *The Australian*, 15th July 1998.

¹¹² Cowle was the executor of Mr Gianatti's will. Mrs Gianatti operated the hotel after her husband's death and was Mattaboni's employer.

¹¹³ Private papers of Mary Augusta Cowle, letter dated 30 January 1934, MN1027, acc. no. 2981A, State Records Office of Western Australia.

¹¹⁴ *Kalgoorlie Miner*, 12 September 1916.

¹¹⁵ G. Kristianson, *The Politics of Patriotism: The Pressure Group Activities of the Returned Servicemen's League*, Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1966, p. 13.

Indeed, the 1934 Kalgoorlie race riots bore an uncanny resemblance to the Wasser riots of 1915, in which Australian soldiers had played a leading role. Just as had happened in Egypt almost twenty years earlier, rioters commandeered a tram to take them on their rampage. Hotels and businesses were ransacked and set alight; the owners' possessions were hoisted into the streets to be carried away by looters. Members of the Kalgoorlie Fire Brigade, of which Edward Jordan had ironically been a member, had their fire hose severed so that they were unable to douse the flames. Gavin Casey, a reporter who witnessed the rioting, wrote evocative and detailed articles that gave a building-by-building account of how the rioters destroyed one migrant establishment after another in a systematic fashion, clearly emulating the pattern established in previous riots. He described how the 'ringleader of the mob', a man 'possessed of a military whistle, and by a code which effectively led the rabble, proceeded up Hannan Street, to the blare of a cornet which had been ransacked from the ruins'.¹¹⁶ A spokesperson for the Slav community confirmed the use of a whistle to orchestrate events. Mr Steve Bozzekovich said that inflammable material that had been used to ignite non-Britishers houses was conveyed 'in motor cars, which moved systematically in response to whistles'.¹¹⁷ As the International Club was set alight, Casey reported that he heard one observer exclaim, 'Christ! This is worse than the Battle of the Wazzir!'¹¹⁸ Rather belatedly, at the end of the night, one of the leading rioters appealed to his comrades-in-arms for restraint. 'We have done enough', he said, urging them not to do anything they might regret in the morning. Using words typical of RSL terminology,¹¹⁹ he shouted, 'Let us use constitutional means. Let us go in the morning, and tell the mine managers that we won't have any but British workers on the mines and that the ____ Dings have got to go.' The youth with a military whistle 'blew a few blasts on the early morning air' and the rioters moved on, but not before venting some final spleen on the Slavonic Hall flagpoles.¹²⁰

Of the meeting that occurred later that day, the *Kalgoorlie Miner* described how the rowdy crowd of about 1,000 people on Richardson Reserve was beginning to listen

¹¹⁶ *Sunday Times*, 4 February 1934.

¹¹⁷ *West Australian*, 2 February 1934.

¹¹⁸ *Sunday Times*, 4 February 1934.

¹¹⁹ See D. W. Rawson, 'Political Violence in Australia', p. 21.

to a suggestion from Labor officials that miners report for work the next day, with another meeting to be held if foreigners were found to be working. At this point the meeting was interrupted by the sound of explosions coming from Dingbat Flat but, initially, there was little unified response from the crowd. When the rioters' effort to raid the ironmongers and the police station for guns proved unsuccessful, another group 'led by a tall elderly man and followed by a dozen youths left hurriedly to raid the Returned Soldiers' League hall in Boulder'.¹²¹ From this juncture, the riots escalated, with the 'tall elderly man' providing both the impetus and the practical assistance that the rioters needed. Mr E. Fraser described organised and armed Australians who appeared to be patrolling the perimeter of the residential area and remembered hearing from Joe Hocking that Hocking's brother had been 'on the Fimiston Road ... [and] was stopped there by armed Australians [who] told him not to go any further'.¹²² It also seems likely that the timing of the explosions on nearby Dingbat Flat to coincide with the miners' meeting was not accidental. Whereas the conciliatory statements of the union officials and Labor parliamentarians were having an effect, the explosions within earshot of the meeting seem rather too timely.

In addition, RSL influence can be detected in the symbolism of Edward Jordan's funeral. Jack Coulter, a local newspaper reporter, described Jordan's burial as 'a full-scale fireman's funeral, with the coffin carried on a fire engine, permanent and volunteer firemen in full uniform and George Jordan's fire helmet on top of the Union Jack framing the casket.'¹²³ Coulter's observation that Jordan's casket was covered with a Union Jack suggested that some who took part in the procession were prompted more by nationalist than personal sentiments. Aged 29 when he died, Jordan would have been far too young to have participated in World War One, but it is clear that the organisers of his funeral wanted to emphasise his 'Britishness'. For those Kalgoorlie residents who had lived in

¹²⁰ *Sunday Times*, 4 February 1934.

¹²¹ *Kalgoorlie Miner*, 31 January 1934. Several days after the riots it was reported that there were persistent rumours that the machine gun parked outside the Boulder RSL had been used in the rioting, although the gun was almost certainly for ceremonial use only. Police records, acc. no. 430, item 700, State Archives, Perth; *Goldfields Observer*, 4 February 1934. Consideration should also be given to the fact that it was the Boulder sub-branch which supplied the guns. This suggests that the earlier radical orientation of the Boulder group did not survive the immediate post-war period.

¹²² Interview with *Stella and Evelyn Villa* and *Mr E. Fraser* for 'A Bad Blue' (The 1934 Kalgoorlie Riots) ABC Social History Radio feature, 1986, producer Bill Bunbury, Battye Library ref no. OH1396.

¹²³ J. Coulter, *By Deadline to Headline*, Access Press, Northbridge, 1997, p. 34.

the area in 1919, the connection between Jordan's death at the hands of an Italian barman and the 1919 death of Thomas Northwood would have been clear. Descriptions of Jordan's funeral suggest that it served as a political event, galvanising racist and nationalistic hatred, particularly among the many drunk and disorderly attendees. Indeed, Gavin Casey went so far as to argue in the *Sunday Times* that Jordan's funeral was the *cause* of continued rioting.¹²⁴

Jordan's burial provided a stark contrast to the one of Joseph Katich, the Yugoslav miner killed during the riots, who had reportedly left a will indicating that he did not want a funeral with any form of religious observance and would prefer one consistent with his 'worker ideals'. Newspaper reports indicate that many mourners came from their hiding places in the bush to attend Katich's funeral and that people of many nationalities, including Britishers, spoke at the ceremony. All the speeches were met with cheers. A Britisher said that Katich had been one of his best friends, that most were very sorry about what had happened and that help would be given by the people of Boulder to rebuild homes that had been destroyed.¹²⁵ Fred Mayman, a Communist activist, remembered the differences between Jordan and Katich's funerals. He said that Jordan's funeral was given 'an enormous amount of publicity' and attracted a huge line of cars out to the cemetery. Katich's funeral, on the other hand, attracted no cars, but a 'cortege of marchers' that he said was 'over a mile and a half long of miners'.¹²⁶ The other funeral to result from the Kalgoorlie riots was that of Charles Stokes, the Britisher rioter who was wounded on Dingbat Flat. His funeral was described as a fairly subdued and poorly-attended affair and, as the *West Australian* remarked, some of the men by the graveside would almost certainly have been fellow rioters.¹²⁷ The large crowds who had participated in the riots, purportedly to 'avenge' Jordan's death, did not attend Stokes' burial.

In the aftermath of the rioting, the *Kalgoorlie Digger* ran a full page article on 'The Alien Question'. The wording made it quite clear that the leadership of the

¹²⁴ *Sunday Times*, 4 February 1934.

¹²⁵ *Kalgoorlie Miner*, 2 February 1934.

¹²⁶ Interview with *Fred Wayman*, conducted by John Clements in 1984. Transcript held in the J. S. Battye Library, Perth, reference no. OH1313, p. 47.

Kalgoorlie sub-branch wanted to distance itself from the more overt violence while still lauding the ideas that underpinned it. Dissembling, the Editor argued that '[d]irect action is always dangerous and although it would appear that some demonstration was necessary it does not seem to have been necessary to wage war on the women and children.'¹²⁸ The League leadership did, however, claim a 'pioneering role' in toughening the language test. It argued that RSL diligence had been inspired by concerns for mine safety, the purity of Australian speech and the potential build-up of 'foreigner colonies in the midst of our cities'.¹²⁹ Nowhere did the League leadership acknowledge that their consistent propaganda against the presence of migrant labour might have played some part in motivating and justifying the deeds of their more 'direct actionist' members. In addition, while never admitting that League members had played a role in the riots, the *Digger* offered the weak excuse that 'the men who probably *started the affair* had no idea of looting [emphasis added]'.¹³⁰ Counteracting ironic suggestions from some in the community that an organised soldier contingent 'should have assisted to quell the affair', an aggrieved tone was adopted to make reference to the events of 1919 and the unpopularity of soldier intervention at that time. The writer argued that, although the soldiers had 'tried to assist the public' and had 'saved the mines', their actions had not been appreciated. 'The mine people have forgotten our work', he whined, 'but our friends never neglect to throw up 'specials' on every occasion.'¹³¹ In short, the last thing on the RSL agenda was to quell any anti-migrant sentiment, but they were keen to be viewed as respectable nationalists, rather than disreputable rioters. Although the League had been stung by criticism of its direct action in 1919, there were still some members who were prepared to fan anti-foreigner sentiment, just a little more covertly than before.

The *West Australian* also alluded to returned servicemen's involvement in the rioting. Its editorial expressed the view that:

¹²⁷ *West Australian*, 2 February 1934.

¹²⁸ *Kalgoorlie Digger*, February 1934.

¹²⁹ *Kalgoorlie Digger*, March 1934.

¹³⁰ *Kalgoorlie Digger*, February 1934.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

[W]hen the present frenzy has died down most of the small minority of those responsible for the outrages and the looting will be sick with what they have done. Kalgoorlie miners have the reputation of being a body of men decent and reasonable beyond the average. Those who knew them on active service respected them, not alone for the fighting qualities which they shared with other Australians, but for their essential decency and intelligence. It remains only for the sober-minded among them to assert their qualities of leadership, and put the hot-heads under the control of public opinion.¹³²

Again, this line of argument was reminiscent of the attitude taken by many mainstream editorials in the aftermath of World War One when digger rebelliousness was more widespread. Returned servicemen were excused as impetuous, slightly mischievous, but fundamentally honourable, men who could be led astray by ‘outsiders’ and ‘troublemakers’.¹³³ In 1934, the evidence clearly suggests the opposite – that the older RSL members provided both political and covert leadership to the mostly younger rioters. These impressions were backed up by my recent dealings with the octogenarian Secretary of the Kalgoorlie RSL, George ‘Rip’ Heyhow. During a research trip in 1998, I asked him for details of the sub-branch’s activities during the 1930s. Using his sturdy frame to block my view of the filing cabinet contents, Mr Heyhow handed me copies of the 1933 and 1935 editions of the *Kalgoorlie Digger* but would not part with the 1934 editions, firmly stating that there was nothing of importance in them.¹³⁴ He was similarly reticent to let me view volumes of the sub-branch’s minutes, saying that I would find this unique series, dating back to the 1920s, equally uninteresting. Upon returning to Kalgoorlie in 1999, I asked again for access to the RSL minutes, only to be told by Mr Heyhow that they had ‘disappeared’. At that time, George Heyhow was also president of the Eastern Goldfields Historical Society. More recently, Mr Heyhow appeared on the ABC’s *Dimensions* programme, as the narrator of an item about the 1934 riots. As a young man of twenty, he was resident in Kalgoorlie in 1934 and was able to give an ‘eyewitness’ account of the period. Interestingly, almost seventy years after the event, he sympathetically reiterated the justifications made by the rioters for their actions. He said:

¹³² *West Australian*, 30 January 1934.

¹³³ D. W. Rawson, ‘Political Violence in Australia’, p. 22.

¹³⁴ Fortunately, copies of this revealing volume are held in the Battye Library, Perth.

There were a lot of foreigners in the town – mainly southern Europeans, Italians, Yugoslavs – and they were a very well-respected group of people. But something was going wrong ... they were getting far better money on the mines than what the average Australian underground miner was getting – and they were very flashily dressed and some of the young foreign element were starting to get pretty cheeky. The women would have to step off the footpath and walk around them when they were coming up the street.¹³⁵

Industrial opposition to the riots

In 1934, notoriously anti-union publisher, Critchley Parker, denounced any suggestion that trade unionists were not responsible for the riots as ‘verbal whitewashing’, claiming that their failure to quell the violence demonstrated that unionism had not ‘honestly opposed’ it.¹³⁶ However, while some miners undoubtedly participated in the 1934 riots, there is considerable evidence to suggest that the vast majority did not. Instead, they held meetings, took votes, denounced the violence and organised to prevent further outbreaks of rioting. Chief Inspector Hunter of the Kalgoorlie Police stated in his report that he was ‘convinced that few if any of the real miners took part.’¹³⁷ While we might debate what being a ‘real miner’ might mean, newspaper reports indicate that the real afternoon shift went underground as usual on the Monday and was oblivious to the turmoil above.¹³⁸ In the midst of the ensuing strike, the conservative newspaper, the *West Australian*, reported that few of the older miners could be seen on the streets.

In line with the official attitude of the union [AWU], they seem to be holding aloof from the anti-foreigner campaign and some of them are not slow to express their abhorrence of the lawlessness.¹³⁹

In an article entitled ‘Miners are Blamed for Work of Irresponsibles’, the *Goldfields Observer* emphasised the youth of the majority of demonstrators and pointed out that

¹³⁵ *Dimensions*, ABC Television, episode 5, broadcast 11 March 2002. See transcript on <http://www.abc.net.au/dimensions>

¹³⁶ *Industrial Australian and Mining Standard*, 15 February 1934.

¹³⁷ Report to the Commissioner of Police, Police file, acc. no. 430, item 700, State Records Office of Western Australia, Perth.

¹³⁸ *West Australian*, 31 January 1934.

¹³⁹ *West Australian*, 1 February 1934.

many miners dissociated themselves from the riots. It was stated that the miners ‘scoff at the idea of the gathering [on Richardson Reserve], which virtually howled down the Minister for Works, being classed as a miners’ meeting and contend that it was a gathering of irresponsibles who had no right to speak for, or act on behalf of the genuine miners’.¹⁴⁰ The *Kalgoorlie Miner* report of the AWU meeting held on Friday, 2 March, stated that:

The general feeling of the meeting was against any association with the element which ran riot and caused such havoc and distress. It was mentioned that they had burned out some fine members of the community. The homes of boys who had given their all in sport for the entertainment of the public and who had been popular citizens, had been destroyed.¹⁴¹

AWU records suggest that a tiny number of their members were in the forefront of the riots, although some of the arrestees listed their occupation as ‘miner’ or ‘labourer’. Of the sixteen charged specifically with rioting, only one, Alan Pereira, was an AWU member. Of the eighty-six persons charged in total, only eight were listed on AWU membership rolls.¹⁴² It is possible that some rioters were members of the Federated Miners’ Union or the Eastern Goldfields Tributurs Association. If so, FMU members would have been far more exposed to RSL ideology than to labour movement influence. In addition, the Tributurs Association appears to have had significant migrant membership (approximately thirty per cent) and, during the strike, its executive resolved to interview management with a view to ‘protect[ing] the interests of those tributurs who may be absent’. This resolution was a recognition that some migrant members had fled into the surrounding bushland to escape the rioting and were not immediately confident to return. As tributuring contracts contained clauses which stipulated that abandonment of

¹⁴⁰ *Goldfields Observer*, 4 February 1934.

¹⁴¹ *Kalgoorlie Miner*, 3 February 1934.

¹⁴² At his trial, Pereira revealed that he had been accused of being a ‘ding’ and that his brothers had been subjected to the language test. The prosecutor suggested to him that he took part in the riots to prove he was Australian. Pereira denied participation. *Kalgoorlie Miner*, 24 March 1934. Three other men, Dwyer, Gilbert and Kelly, were possible AWU members, but the surviving details are inconclusive. AWU (WA Branch) Membership Roll, 1934-35, file no. N117/1129, Noel Butlin Archives Centre, Australian National University.

the tribute could result in the issuing of termination notices, the Tributers Association was concerned to ensure that the tributes of their migrant members were not forfeited.¹⁴³

Because the early mass meetings had undoubtedly included a great many non-unionists, AWU officials took steps to limit attendance at subsequent meetings to those with union tickets. By the end of the week, the unofficial miners' committee had agreed to leave negotiations with management to the AWU leadership. Despite the AWU's constant refusal to support a stopwork over the presence of migrants on the mines, the outcome of the dispute revealed the ambivalent attitude of the union leaders towards the explosion of racism on the fields. For them, it would appear that the main issue was the strike, not the racism. By playing on the common stereotype that foreign miners were dangerous underground because they lacked English skills, the officials were able to reach a deal with the Chamber of Mines for a more rigorous application of the language test. On the Sunday, by an almost unanimous vote, the miners agreed to return to work on the understanding that the language regulations would be strictly enforced. This arrangement was little more than a cheap ploy to get the miners back to work, because the AWU leadership had no real interest in scapegoating migrant miners. In fact, they organised a defensive force of some three hundred miners to patrol Boulder on Wednesday evening to prevent further trouble. In addition, a deputation of AWU miners met with the Mayor and demanded that the violence be stopped. The *West Australian* reported that '[t]he Mayor said that many had told him that they were in sympathy with the stricken foreigners, and deplored the fact that no provision had been made for their housing and care during the day.'¹⁴⁴ Moreover, the AWU leadership expressed its 'determination to give the union ticket to all members irrespective of nationality'.¹⁴⁵

When leaving the fields, Minister for Works, Alex McCallum, was reported to have said, 'The dispute was created outside the ranks of the union and was handed over to irresponsible individuals who had no experience and were not even known in union

¹⁴³ Minute Book and Record of Membership Fees and Levies Paid, 1934-35, Eastern Goldfields Tributers Association, acc. no. 1730A, item 5, State Records Office of Western Australia.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁵ *West Australian*, 2 February 1934.

circles'.¹⁴⁶ AWU miners at the Sons of Gwalia mine censured Labor Premier Collier for not visiting the fields and taking a firm stance on the need for unity among all workers, which was especially significant given that many migrant miners were employed on that mine.¹⁴⁷ Collier, for his part, blamed foreign communists for the riots, a claim that was eagerly repeated by the *Sydney Morning Herald* in its palpable anxiety to protect Australia's international reputation.¹⁴⁸ For their part, Communist Party leaders castigated an unnamed Western Australian member for failing to see the difference between supporting the right of migrants to have jobs and getting behind the mine managers' position. On the contrary, one editorial argued, employers wanted to retain migrant workers 'as a fruitful source of division among the workers'.¹⁴⁹ Jack Crisp suggested that it was the employers who acted to maintain racial divisions in the workforce in the aftermath of the rioting. He recalled:

There was a great deal of bitterness. I was working underground at the time and ... the Australians, Italians and Slavs were a mixed workforce underground and things were very unhappy for quite a while. The mine staff did the very best to segregate the Australian[s] from the southern Europeans.¹⁵⁰

The *Westralian Worker*, the AWU-run weekly paper, somewhat cynically denounced those union members who took part in the rioting as having displayed 'an inexcusable lack of solidarity'. However, its articles did explain that the main factors leading to the riots were speed-ups, graft and high youth unemployment, maintaining that all workers, regardless of nationality, faced the same conditions and that racism only played into the hands of the Chamber of Mines. One writer pointed out, 'We cannot, as workers, afford to quarrel with the workers of any other country ... [W]e need their assistance in our struggles against a common enemy.'¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.* This was not entirely true, of course. Bob Fletcher, one of the members of the Unofficial Miners' Committee, was prominent in 'union circles'. However, it can be confirmed that more than half of the members of the committee (Charteris, Gilbert, Baker and Brozam) were not members of the AWU.

¹⁴⁷ *Red Star*, 2 March 1934.

¹⁴⁸ *Kalgoorlie Miner*, 31 January 1934; *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 February 1934.

¹⁴⁹ *Communist Review*, April-May 1934.

¹⁵⁰ Interview with Nancy and Jack Crisp.

¹⁵¹ *Westralian Worker*, 2, 9 February 1934.

Many decades later, Jack Coleman movingly described the terrible toll inflicted by the conditions on the mines which served to divide the workforce and deflect anger away from the employers, towards the migrant workers. In his opinion:

The animosity was always there, this racist sort of an outlook. But as one old fella made it clear when he got up on the stage ... the night they carried the motion they would go back to work but they had to learn English. He could hardly speak. He was silicotic. His lungs had gone in the mines. And he had a boy, a bit younger than me and couldn't get in the mines and this was everybody's attitude. You see, if there's unemployment, you look around for someone that's different and say 'Oh they're doing it.' The real unemployment on the mines came from the avalanche of people who crossed the Trans line ... farmers' sons, farmers' unemployed. They weren't growing wheat, their wheat was one and six a bag or something. And there were droves of them. There used to be a saying on the Lake View and Star ... that if you wanted a job on the Star, tell him you were five foot eight at a minimum, you know, weighed twelve stone and a farmer's son and you got on because [of] no industrial experience and there was some truth in that too. You just think. You are there. You're dusted. You're dying and your kid can't get a job. Well, who's taken my kid's job. Those foreign bastards, they're taking my kid's job. And that's the thing that made it possible to develop ... some disagree with me and say 'No, it's just inherent in people, that they don't like others' but it wasn't true because we worked with 'em and played with 'em.¹⁵²

For his part, Richard Hamilton, President of the Chamber of Mines, expressed the view that it was a deficient education system that had led to the riots. Sanctimoniously, he said:

It shows that secular education alone, without a sufficient police or moral force, will not keep some people from becoming savages when acting under mob impulse. Let us hope that we shall never again see such a display of cruelty, hatred and destruction.¹⁵³

While little credence can be given to Hamilton's analysis, the 1934 Kalgoorlie race riots do show that, despite the contradictory position taken by some union leaders, the union movement potentially provided the classrooms where anti-racist lessons could be

¹⁵² Interview with *Jack Coleman*.

¹⁵³ President's Address, Annual General Meeting, The Chamber of Mines of Western Australia (Incorporated), Kalgoorlie, 27 March 1934, copy held in the National Library of Australia.

learned. In addition, while racism was certainly widespread in Kalgoorlie, forces which drew working class people together could also be identified. At school, in sporting competitions, at social events and at work, there were many opportunities for Britishers to meet and mix with their migrant counterparts. Although this interaction did not automatically challenge racist ideas, it did provide as many opportunities for fraternisation as for friction. It is to these examples that this discussion now turns.

Signs of integration

An examination of the role of unions and workers in the 1934 Kalgoorlie riots illustrates important incongruities in previous interpretations of the empirical evidence on this period. Other scholars have indicated that a significant degree of social, economic and political division existed between the Britisher community and the various groups that comprised the 'foreign' population. While it is perhaps predictable that studies of race riots highlight racial division, such a focus should not distract attention from countervailing undercurrents. Gerritsen, for example, claimed that '[t]he basis of the social problems that came to the fore in the 'twenties was undoubtedly the foreigners' separation from the local Australian community. The foreigners had their own clubs, hotels, sports ... social habits and living areas.'¹⁵⁴ If ethnic segmentation was as strong as Gerritsen suggested, why were Jordan and his Britisher friends socialising in an Italian-run hotel? Certainly, many establishments attracted regular customers on the basis of nationality, but this division was always somewhat elastic. At the inquest into Jordan's death, Rena Gianatti, the co-proprietor of the Home from Home Hotel, said that the deceased had been a regular at her establishment. Claudio Mataboni, the barman who threw the fatal punch, concurred by saying that he had known Jordan for at least twelve months because the fireman was a frequent patron of the Italian-run hotel.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵⁴ Gerritsen, 'The 1934 Kalgoorlie Riots', p. 62.

¹⁵⁵ See transcript of inquest, *Goldfields Observer*, 18 February 1934.

Wally Dawes, a resident of Kalgoorlie during the riots, spoke of the integration that existed between the Britisher and foreigner communities. As he put it:

[T]here had been Italian families there from quite early days and they were well integrated into the community. They were fairly well thought of ... and their boys mixed with the Australian boys and all that. And although they invariably went to a different school [from Wally], meaning they were mostly predominantly Catholics. Well, there was quite a lot of Australian boys and girls went there too.¹⁵⁶

In a similar vein, Anthony Splivalo, a Dalmatian immigrant, recorded that his early school experiences were very welcoming. Even after being rounded up and interned during the First World War, he explicitly differentiated the state-sanctioned racism of his internment from the often welcoming response he received from many 'ordinary' Australians.¹⁵⁷ Evelyn Villa, whose father was Italian and mother was Australian, recalled a woman whose business had been destroyed in the riot. She said 'the lady that owned the hotel [Mrs Furia, formerly Osmetti], she had four boys [who were] very good sportsmen; they were in everything'.¹⁵⁸ Descriptions of local Australian Rules matches are littered with tales of the sporting prowess of the Osmetti brothers and members of other migrant families, playing alongside their Britisher team mates. In one game in 1935, 'Jacko' Osmetti opened the scoring, while Diorites dominated play in the final quarter. In another match, Marchesi replaced the injured Forrest while Tomich and the Osmetti brothers were named, alongside Laffin, Spence and Gibson, as the best players for the Mines Rovers team.¹⁵⁹ This 'ethnically-integrated' line up was the team for which Edward Jordan had played before his death. Marjorie Henderson mentioned that she was in the same class as one of the Osmetti boys and that they were 'very well known, very well respected and liked'.¹⁶⁰ In the memoirs of a Kalgoorlie local, 'Blue' Nelli, also the child of an Italian father and Australian mother, recalled that he played in

¹⁵⁶ Interview with *Wally Dawes* for 'A Bad Blue' (The 1934 Kalgoorlie Riots) ABC Social History Radio feature, 1986, producer Bill Bunbury, Battye Library ref no. OH1398.

¹⁵⁷ Splivalo, *The Home Fires*, pp. 15, 26, 29, 36, 52-3, 57-8.

¹⁵⁸ Interview with *Stella* and *Evelyn Villa* and *Mr E. Fraser*.

¹⁵⁹ *Kalgoorlie Miner*, 17 February 1935.

¹⁶⁰ Interview with *Marjorie Henderson* for 'A Bad Blue' (The 1934 Kalgoorlie Riots) ABC Social History Radio feature, 1986, producer Bill Bunbury, Battye Library ref no. OH1401.

a schoolboy team which represented the Goldfields in Perth.¹⁶¹ In fact, three years *after* the riots, Tomich, Dellaca and Charlie Osmetti were selected to play in a goldfields team that defeated South Australia on the Kalgoorlie Oval. Also selected for that team was Frank Jordan, Edward Jordan's brother.¹⁶² Indeed, Jack and Nancy Crisp both felt that such integration was widespread. Nancy said:

But in the tennis clubs and football clubs, they'd been to school together and ... there was general friendliness in the district ... up our way, support was entirely with the southern European element ... I knew of no support for the rioters.¹⁶³

Evelyn Villa recalled that her father played an important role in the social life of Kalgoorlie. She said:

[W]e were one of the families with a very, very nice car and he was called on such a lot to participate at funerals and weddings and things like that and I think he was a very highly respected man in the community.

When asked to think about whether there were any signs that the riots might occur, she said that there *was* some social segregation, but that it contrasted with integration in the workplace, where '[t]here was a big majority of Slavs and Italians and a few Greeks and that on the goldfields and I think they all worked in harmony with one another'.¹⁶⁴ It was not only in the mines that the workforce was mixed. The *Kalgoorlie Miner* reported that many Britisher women had been thrown out of work when the Greek-owned cafes, in which they were employed, were destroyed.¹⁶⁵ When asked to recall any incidences of migrant men being disrespectful to local women, Cora Sudlow disputed such a

¹⁶¹ W. Blue Nelli, *The Best Battler*, no publication details, held in the William Grundt Memorial Library, Kalgoorlie.

¹⁶² For the information regarding Frank Jordan, I am grateful for correspondence from John Terrell, author of *Goldfields Sport, A Century of Heroes, Heroines and Happenings*, Bateman, 1993, letter dated 4 February, 2000, and to John Merritt for bringing Terrell's book to my attention.

¹⁶³ Interview with *Jack and Nancy Crisp*.

¹⁶⁴ Interview with *Stella and Evelyn Villa and Mr E. Fraser*.

¹⁶⁵ *Kalgoorlie Miner*, 31 January 1934.

stereotype. She said, ‘we felt so safe ... we’d walk home across a mining lease at night, just a couple of girls, and we never dreamt of having to worry about anything.’¹⁶⁶

Far from a ‘sense of shame’ that was often mentioned in the aftermath of the riots, the Crisps showed contempt for the rioters and commented on the way in which people gave support to migrants by offering them places to stay, food, clothing and other practical assistance. Jack said:

Amongst my friends in Boulder were quite a number of young men of Italian descent, but Australian-born, and my sympathies were very largely with them. I had no time at all for the rioters.¹⁶⁷

It should be noted that Jack specifically mentioned those friends who were Australian-born, as if this was a higher recommendation. Similarly, Sidney Hall, the man who blew on the bugle to rouse the rioters, freely admitted in court that he did not like foreigners but gave evidence that he had gone to the Boulder riots accompanied by a young Italian man.¹⁶⁸ These instances suggest that racist ideas and Britisher/southern European interaction were a constant influence on race relations in Kalgoorlie, but were pressures that could produce unpredictable results.

Some migrants who hid in the bush outside town left prized possessions with their Britisher neighbours. Beatrice Wellington recalled that her mother kept cases in her chook pen for southern European friends. Mr E. Fraser described how his family helped fleeing migrants:

I remember the people coming to the house with their tin trunks ... They were mostly people that lived on the Flats below our home and they wanted us to look after their belongings ... Well, our verandah was full of black, tin trunks.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁶ Interview with *Cora Sudlow* for ‘A Bad Blue’ (The 1934 Kalgoorlie Riots) ABC Social History Radio feature, 1986, producer Bill Bunbury, Battye Library ref no. OH1402.

¹⁶⁷ See, for example, M. and A. Webb, *Golden Destiny: The Centenary History of Western Australia*, published by the city of Kalgoorlie-Boulder, Kalgoorlie, 1993, p. 661; Interview with *Nancy and Jack Crisp*.

¹⁶⁸ *Kalgoorlie Miner*, 24 March 1934.

¹⁶⁹ Interview with *Beatrice Wellington* for ‘A Bad Blue’ (The 1934 Kalgoorlie Riots) ABC Social History Radio feature, 1986, producer Bill Bunbury, Battye Library ref no. OH1403; Interview with *Stella and Evelyn Villa* and *Mr E. Fraser*.

Lily Larcombe, whose father-in-law owned the Golden Eagle (where, incidentally, Charlie Stokes' sister, Irene, was a frequent drinker) related how her father-in-law harboured fleeing foreigners in his hotel and turned away rioters at the door.¹⁷⁰ Nancy Crisp told of her mother comforting the proprietor of one of the hotels that had been destroyed:

She went up to her and she saw her standing in the street almost in tears and gazing at the still-smoking ruins of the hotel. And she just went up to her and put her arms around her ... and she just said well, she was so sorry.

Incidentally, Mrs Crisp remembered the proprietor's reply, which was also indicative of the degree to which many migrants felt that they had been integrated into community life. She said, 'I didn't think they'd do it to me.'¹⁷¹ Stella Villa fondly remembers all the help they received when it became clear they would have to leave their South Boulder home until the rioting had ceased. She recalled that:

[T]hey were all Australian neighbours apart from the one across the road. They shifted any furniture of value out of our homes, put it in different homes and I think the next door neighbours were very, very good. They took Dad's car up the garage and had it refitted. Saw that the tyres were okay ... they refilled the car and we set sail.¹⁷²

This evidence calls into question claims made by Boncompagni that some migrant groups in Kalgoorlie had a 'tendency to form group settlements' and that their own actions 'worked against rapid assimilation'.¹⁷³ In a similar vein, Bertola suggested that the riots were inflamed, in part, by the 'social behaviour' of the migrants.¹⁷⁴ Both

¹⁷⁰ This hotel was purchased by the Larcombe family with the proceeds from the sale of the 'Golden Eagle', the largest gold nugget ever found in Australia. Interview with *Lily Larcombe* for 'A Bad Blue' (The 1934 Kalgoorlie Riots) ABC Social History Radio feature, 1986, producer Bill Bunbury, Battye Library ref no. OH1403. Bunbury, *Reading Labels on Jam Tins*, p. 44.

¹⁷¹ Interview with *Jack and Nancy Crisp*.

¹⁷² Interview with *Stella and Evelyn Villa and Mr E. Fraser*.

¹⁷³ A. Boncompagni, 'From the Apennine to the Bush: 'temporary migrants from Tuscan communities to Western Australia, 1921-1939', Labour and Community Conference, Proceedings of the Sixth National Conference of the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History, Robert Hood and Ray Markey (eds), Wollongong, 2-4 October, 1999, p. 30.

¹⁷⁴ Bertola, Kalgoorlie, Gold and the World Economy, p. 230.

writers downplay the effects of racism on migrant behaviour and both analyses, if taken to their logical conclusion, place partial responsibility for the riots on the shoulders of those who had homes and possessions destroyed. In effect, such analyses are little different to that produced by the *Age* at the time of the riots. In a classic case of ‘blaming the victim’, its editor argued that:

[e]ntirely by their own choice foreign nationals live intensely segregated ... [and] ... make little or no effort to live up to the economic and social standards which, not without much hard struggle, Australians have contrived to set up ... If the latter find these standards imperilled resentment is natural; antipathy towards those responsible is not racial, but economic.¹⁷⁵

Certainly, such generalisations are at odds with Stella Villa’s description of life in her street. Her recollections suggest that integration occurred at a number of different levels. Inter-marriage was not uncommon, nor was it unlikely that a migrant family would have Britisher neighbours. Sport and other social occasions provided many opportunities for ‘ethnic mixing’. Overwhelmingly, it would seem, people made friends on the basis of proximity, rather than nationality.

The most misleading stereotype of the local migrant community has been the claim that migrant workers continued this process of ‘self-segregation’ by abstaining from labour movement politics.¹⁷⁶ With little corroborating evidence, Boncompagni announced that ‘the large majority of them was driven by economic needs and displayed little interest in politics, the local Anglo-Australian society or labour organization’.¹⁷⁷ In fact, AWU records confirm the degree of Britisher and migrant integration in the miners’ union. The 1933-34 and 1934-35 state membership rolls reveal numerous names of obvious southern European background. To make a numerical calculation of southern European AWU membership on the goldfields and to minimise regional

¹⁷⁵ *The Age*, 1 February 1934.

¹⁷⁶ The dangers of making sweeping political generalisations on the basis of nationality are outlined in G. Cresciani, ‘Italian Anti-Fascism in Australia, 1922-45’ in E. Wheelwright and K. Buckley (eds), *Essays in the Political Economy of Australian Capitalism*, vol. 3, Australian and New Zealand Book Company, Sydney, 1979.

¹⁷⁷ Boncompagni, ‘From the Appenine to the Bush’, p. 30. While Boncompagni’s study focussed on Tuscan workers, his work suggested that their experiences were not dissimilar to those of other southern European migrants.

variation, seven common goldfields addresses were chosen – Coolgardie, Wiluna, Kalgoorlie, Boulder, Gwalia, Southern Cross and Fimiston. In the 1933-34 rolls, 2,477 members recorded their address as being in one of these towns and, of those, 569 had southern European surnames. In the 1934-35 rolls, of the 3,123 members living in the aforementioned towns, 643 names suggested southern European birth. These figures indicate that, in stark contrast to descriptions of the migrant community as ‘non-integrated’, more than 20 per cent of the AWU goldfields membership in Western Australia came from southern Europe, roughly analogous to their presence in the workforce. This membership density did not alter in the wake of the riots.¹⁷⁸ Indeed, given the tendency of migrants to Anglicise their names, especially in the wake of World War One attacks on migrant liberty, this calculation is likely to have underestimated the southern European presence.

Moreover, because of the ferocity of the 1934 riots, it might have been expected that migrant miners would suffer greater discrimination in employment, but the evidence suggests that there was little scapegoating. In a report from the monthly meeting of the AWU Mining Branch, Secretary Alf Watts advised that, of 405 men who had undergone the language test, only two workers had failed.¹⁷⁹ In addition, while CPA reports of the extent of Communist influence must be ‘taken with a grain of salt’, it is worth mentioning Jack Coleman’s impression that the anti-racist position taken by the local Communist Party branch during and after the rioting had not harmed its reputation and had, in fact, played a role in getting a leading CPA member, Bronc Finlay, elected to the secretaryship of the AWU Mining Branch in 1938.¹⁸⁰

All these indications of integration were to provide the social and industrial basis for a unified struggle in the following year. Indeed, the Chamber of Mines/RSL combination that encouraged racial division among Britisher and migrant workers would soon receive a severe setback. In 1935, the AWU challenged the mine managers over working hours on the mines. During this dispute, the Kalgoorlie mining workforce was

¹⁷⁸ AWU (WA Branch) Membership Rolls, 1933-34, 1934-35, file no N117/1129, Noel Butlin Archives Centre, Australian National University.

¹⁷⁹ *Westralian Worker*, 6 April 1934.

¹⁸⁰ Interview with *Jack Coleman*.

able to promote inter-ethnic solidarity as a means of increasing its industrial strength, as the following account demonstrates.

They wanted shorter hours, so they took them!: the 1935 hours dispute

Just one year after ethnic division racked Kalgoorlie, the Chamber of Mines and the AWU entered into a protracted dispute over the length of the working week. During 1934, the AWU Mining Division had served a log of claims on the Chamber of Mines. The new award gave some pay increases but allowed for no reductions in hours and suggested that the existing eighty-eight hour fortnight could be worked using alternating forty and forty-eight hour weeks, instead of the weekly forty-four hours that had been in operation. The AWU agreed to accept the new award but warned the Chamber of Mines that any attempt to implement the new hours clause would be regarded as a ‘hostile action’. Immediately hostile, the Chamber proceeded to implement the new hours, locking out those miners who attempted to work under the old arrangements. The AWU leadership called for strike action.¹⁸¹

It was reported that the strike inspired ‘a wonderful demonstration of solidarity’ throughout the goldfields.¹⁸² Around six thousand workers were affected by the dispute, and there was little evidence of dissension within the ranks.¹⁸³ Initially, pickets were placed at the shaft heads but even the *West Australian* had to admit that they were peaceful affairs. No-one attempted to defy the union’s decision.¹⁸⁴ The Sons of Gwalia miners had been working the new hours for some two years, professing a preference for the extra day to make a trip to the ‘city’, but they too agreed to stop work in support of the Golden Mile unionists.¹⁸⁵ A deputation from nearby Grant’s Patch came to Kalgoorlie to express their support. Throughout the dispute, the strike committee

¹⁸¹ *Kalgoorlie Miner*, 7, 8 January 1935.

¹⁸² *West Australian*, 18 January 1935.

¹⁸³ *Westralian Worker*, 14, 18 January, 8 February 1935.

¹⁸⁴ *West Australian*, 8 January 1935; Branch Secretary’s Annual Report, AWU (WA Branch), for the year ended 31 May 1935, Noel Butlin Archives Centre, Australian National University.

¹⁸⁵ *West Australian*, 7 January 1935; *Workers’ Weekly*, 11 January 1935; *Kalgoorlie Miner*, 18 February 1935.

produced a weekly bulletin to boost solidarity.¹⁸⁶ An Appeal Committee swung into action and donations came from all over Australia. A letter was forwarded to the NSW Labor Council, urging financial assistance. Lance Sharkey moved a motion, seconded by Jock Garden, that an appeal be sent to all unions to support the Kalgoorlie miners. Garden reminded delegates that the Western Australian miners had, in the past, forwarded thousands of pounds to support other strikers. The motion was passed unanimously.¹⁸⁷

Efforts were also made to overcome the racial division of the past. Slav miners discussed details surrounding their representative who had been sent to the coast to raise support funds. They passed a resolution which indicated that they were 'quite satisfied with the handling of the trouble by their British comrades'.¹⁸⁸ An entertainment committee organised boxing and wrestling matches to raise money for the strikers. Fundraising dances were held, with the Yugoslav Society providing both band and premises for the event.¹⁸⁹ The training hall, trashed in the riots of the previous year, became a 'hive of industry', with a high level of fraternisation between Britisher and southern European workers.¹⁹⁰ The Sparta Soccer Club donated to the strike fund and workers at the Lake View and Star Company, one of the goldfields' largest employers of foreign labour, solidly supported the strike action.¹⁹¹ *Workers' Weekly* was moved to print that:

A steel front of native and foreign workers has been preserved in the struggle, and amongst the ranks of those who fought with rifles a year ago is the most intimate fraternisation in the face of the common enemy.¹⁹²

Even if the picture painted by the CPA was not so rosy in reality, the unanimity of the strikers suggests that, even after the terrible events of 1934, sufficient mutuality and

¹⁸⁶ *Workers' Weekly*, 26 April 1935.

¹⁸⁷ *Workers' Weekly*, 8 February 1935.

¹⁸⁸ *Kalgoorlie Miner*, 1 February 1935; *Westralian Worker*, 14, 18 January, 8 February 1935.

¹⁸⁹ *Kalgoorlie Miner*, 14 January 1935.

¹⁹⁰ *Workers' Weekly*, 15 February 1935.

¹⁹¹ *Kalgoorlie Miner*, 15, 19 January 1935.

¹⁹² *Workers' Weekly*, 1 February 1935.

trust between migrant and Britisher workers existed to accomplish an organised, disciplined and successful strike.

The Chamber of Mines also displayed ‘wonderful solidarity’ during the struggle over working hours. It often refused to negotiate with AWU delegations, even a delegation that included the Minister for Mines, and it was widely believed that the Chamber was prepared to ‘starve the miners back to work’.¹⁹³ Although the editorial of the RSL’s journal expressed regret at the hardship faced by families, it refused to take sides in the dispute, except to point out that the business owner, ‘who is a working man himself’, was having to carry his customers.¹⁹⁴ After six weeks, a return to work was accepted, although a significant level of opposition to this move was reflected in the 320/200 vote. Management and union agreed to abide by the outcome of a ballot to be taken among union members for the purposes of ascertaining which working hours arrangement was preferred.¹⁹⁵ On 30 March 1935, AWU members voted overwhelmingly to reject the imposition of a forty-eight hour week. Bertola pointed out that, as a result of the dispute and its successful resolution, ‘AWU membership among the underground workforce rose from about 40 per cent in February 1934 to over 72 per cent’ by the time the ballot was held.¹⁹⁶

At a mass AWU meeting on 7 January 1935, one speaker from the floor had suggested that the union should consult with the Kurrawang woodcutters in order to gain their support. It was stated in reply that the woodcutters (mainly southern Europeans and highly unionised) would support any action that the AWU decided to take regarding the new award.¹⁹⁷ However, the response of the woodcutters was more mixed than this statement suggests. In October 1934, the woodline workers had taken their own industrial action in pursuit of claims for an increased price for cutting engine wood, open competition for provision of supplies, restoration of holidays lost in the 1931 award, and the forty-four hour week. A stopwork meeting of all AWU members

¹⁹³ *Kalgoorlie Miner*, 4 February 1935.

¹⁹⁴ *Kalgoorlie Digger*, February 1935.

¹⁹⁵ *Workers’ Weekly*, 1 March 1935.

¹⁹⁶ Bertola, *Kalgoorlie and the World Economy*, p. 239; Branch Secretary’s Annual Report, AWU (WA Branch), for the year ended 31 May 1935, Noel Butlin Archives Centre, Australian National University.

¹⁹⁷ *West Australian*, 7 January 1935.

on the goldfields heard one of the delegates, Mr Graeme, oppose press statements to the effect that the Britishers wanted to resume work, assuring members that all the woodline workers, 'irrespective of nationality were 100 per cent. strong' in supporting the strike action.¹⁹⁸ After much debate, it was recommended that the woodcutters should resume work and that the matter would be settled at arbitration. Three months later, when the woodcutters were asked to support the miners, the vote was split 80 votes for, 80 votes against, striking. The AWU official presiding over the meeting cast his vote in favour of remaining at work. The miners received word that the woodcutters would assist the dispute financially, and that they would stop work immediately if asked.¹⁹⁹ No request was forthcoming.

The woodcutters' arbitration case was much delayed and it was not until April 1935, that Justice Dwyer handed down an amended award which granted the forty-four hour week and restored the lost holidays. Dwyer chastised the woodline workers for striking and made the following comment:

It is difficult to understand the mentality of the workers at Kurrawang in these circumstances. Some excuse may be made for them in consideration of the fact that fully 75 per cent of the Kurrawang wood cutters are foreigners from Southern Europe and Italy, nearly all of whom do not understand the English language or read our newspapers. They present a fertile field for the sowing and cultivation of subversive industrial propaganda by agents, whose motives and objects are not for the good of the State or the workers.²⁰⁰

At a subsequent meeting of the Kalgoorlie and Boulder section of the AWU Mining Division, a motion was carried extending congratulations to the woodline workers for their victory. The members also resolved to protest to the State Executive about President Dwyer's remarks, which, they said, would 'promote racial hatred'.²⁰¹

¹⁹⁸ *Westralian Worker*, 26 October 1934.

¹⁹⁹ *West Australian*, 14, 16 January 1935.

²⁰⁰ *Westralian Worker*, 31 May 1935.

²⁰¹ L. J. Triatt, Sec, AWU (MB) to P. J. Trainer, Secretary, State Executive ALP, dated 28 May 1935, ALP WA State Executive correspondence files, State Records Office of Western Australia.

Conclusion

A detailed examination of the three Kalgoorlie race riots demonstrates that racism is not an immutable feature of working class politics, but an ideology that can be contradicted, both by the material conditions of workers' lives and by the practical intervention of those who choose to stand against a racist hegemony. While other historians have tended to study one or another of the riots in virtual isolation, this study demonstrates the importance of linking the three outbursts in an effort to understand the ebbs and flows of racist ideology. While, in 1916, opposition within the labour movement to racist policies was slight, by 1919, sufficient workers were convinced of the need for solidarity to take up the cause of migrant workers in a relatively concerted fashion. Although the 1934 Kalgoorlie riots still stand out as one of the most ugly instances of racial antagonism in Australia, significant evidence exists to show that resistance to racist ideas among workers could emerge even while racism was quite literally 'running riot'. While not seeking to 'whitewash' the degree to which racism did permeate working class consciousness, this case study illustrates that the majority of workers used their union to offer solidarity to the migrant workers. Even among those for whom racism was unexceptional, the experience of living, working and socialising in a town of many nationalities served to cement relationships and sympathies that could not be instantly swept aside by an upsurge of racist violence, nor by a crude calculation of available jobs. Although competitive employment relations on the mines undoubtedly created tensions, the collective nature of the workforce offered opportunities for workers to build inter-racial solidarity for their mutual industrial benefit. Far from 'starting on the mines', it was the Kalgoorlie labour movement that was able to challenge racial division and promote inter-ethnic solidarity. At the very least, racism was, for workers, a contested issue.

The principal force responsible for racial division in Kalgoorlie was the Chamber of Mines, which consistently sought the most competitive forms of labour hire. In order to further this aim, it promoted 'white' solidarity by outwardly upholding a policy of Britisher preference while, in practice, offering the worst and most lowly-paid work to southern Europeans. It refused to take any action against perceived corrupt

hiring practices and inflamed racist sentiment by praising southern European miners as hardworking and submissive. The RSL was a useful ally in these efforts to both incorporate and marginalise migrant labour. While it consistently supported the employers' right to freedom of contract, its constant vilification of southern Europeans fostered greater alienation of migrant workers from their British counterparts, and encouraged the perception among both groups that their most devoted ally was the Chamber of Mines. Because the RSL was cross-class in nature and dominated by conservative sections of society, its members played an important role in the dissemination of nationalism among working class people. For the RSL, internationalism was anathema to its vision of a homogenous, capitalist White Australia. Edward Jordan's death gave RSL activists an opportunity to capitalise on their long-running campaign against southern Europeans. In 1934, the evidence suggests that RSL members helped to fan latent racist views into active racist turmoil.

For its part, the AWU leadership had a protean record in the defence of solidarity across national divisions. Self-seeking to the end, it sought a larger membership and was prepared to recruit southern Europeans to further that goal. Membership records show that it was at least as successful at recruiting southern Europeans as they were British workers. However, officials were also prepared to sacrifice the interests of southern European members when they became useful scapegoats for poor conditions on the mines. While the AWU leadership would not fight racism, it generally had no material interest in perpetuating division, except to cover industrial and political weaknesses. During the 1935 strike, Kalgoorlie unionists were able to challenge racial antipathy, build unity along class lines, and win an impressive industrial victory in the process.