HOGAN’S FLAT

Allan Whittaker was one of four union members shot by police while protesting at Port Melbourne’s waterfront on 2 November 1928. These events had a lasting impact on the Port Melbourne waterside workers and their families, as well as the development of unionism in Australia.

Australian waterside workers were no strangers to industrial action. While the Waterside Workers Federation won its first award in 1914 with weight limits, overtime and hourly rates of pay guaranteed, the economic hardship caused by World War I resulted in waterside strikes in 1917 and 1919.¹ Discontent continued to grow during the 1920s when the economy further declined and unemployment increased.

By 1928 the Federal Government introduced the Transport Workers’ Act. This Act, which became colloquially known as the ‘Dog Collar Act’, saw cuts to overtime, a freeze on all pay rates, and discrimination against unionists who went on strike. Chief Justice Beeby ruled against improved safety regulations and tea-breaks, with few exceptions. The new Act also meant waterside workers needed to purchase a license to work. These licenses were colour-coded, making it easy to distinguish union members from non-union members.

All of these changes were to come into effect on 10 September 1928. On that day, Melbourne waterside workers, including those at Port Melbourne, went on strike. They followed the example of workers in Queensland and were soon themselves followed by other states. To counter this, industry bosses brought in non-union strike-breaking labour – migrants of non-English speaking background, ex-servicemen and university students – to work in place of those on strike.

The Port Phillip Stevedores Association members were some of the last to agree to return to work under these new and much more restrictive conditions, returning reluctantly almost a month later on 19 October 1928. By this point Chief Justice Beeby had ruled that 60 per cent of jobs were to go to non-union labour and only 40 per cent to union workers.

An estimated 10,000 licenses had been issued under the new registration process, which was double the available jobs. In addition, the workforce brought in during the strike remained, making work for the waterside workers even harder to obtain.² Despite the Beeby ruling none of the unionists were offered work.

The atmosphere was tense as union workers gathered in the open at Hogan’s Flat to pick up work. Traditionally they had gathered indoors at the Port Phillip Stevedores Association club rooms in Bay Street. The strike-breakers travelled by train from Flinders Street and were escorted by police from the station to Princes Pier. Things came to a head on 2 November, when unionists and the community attacked non-union labourers on a train headed to the docks.

Accounts of the actions that occurred on that day vary from source to source. Some say there were 700 union workers, others 2000. Contemporary journalists reported that it was Princes Pier that was attacked, whereas later accounts identify Station Pier. What is certain is that union workers had no paid work for the previous eight weeks. Angry at missing out on work again with preference given to non-union labour, the unionists attempted to storm the pier where non-unionists were working. The pier was guarded by twenty-three policemen.

Unionists were armed with only their fists and in some instances stones, while the police had batons and guns. The official account at the time was that the police fired – in the air or at the ground – in self-defence. Four unionists were wounded. For one of them, Allan Whittaker, it was the second time he had been shot – the first occasion on 25 April 1915 at Gallipoli. But this time his his wounds were fatal and he died on Australia Day 1929.

The coroner ruled that the police had acted in self-defence and that the shooting was justified. Newspaper coverage at the time was very conservative praising the police and damning the unionists. It did not report that of the four men wounded, three were former ANZAC veterans with impressive war records. Neither did the newspapers report that the wounds sustained by the four men were all received from behind, a clear indication that the unionists were in fact retreating when the shooting started. Later witnesses testified that the police, led by Inspector Mossop, fired live rounds into the unionists.

Jim Nagel, George Grey, James Williams and Allan Whittaker were all shot by police when they had turned to leave the pier. Nagel was shot in the arm, Grey in the back and Whittaker in the back of the neck. Williams, Grey and Nagel recovered.

After Whittaker’s death, life grew worse for the Port Phillip waterside workers and their families. Preference continued to be given to non-unionists. For the Port community the 1920’s had already been hard and many were struggling. When the Great Depression set in any work, not only at the waterside, became harder to find with an estimated 75% to 90% of adults unemployed. Despite this, the Waterside Workers Federation remained strong, amalgamating to form the Maritime Union Australia in 1993.

Sources:

Argus, 3 November 1928, 4 November 1928

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3 Argus, 3 November 1928; 4 November 1928; Jill Barnard, Welcome and Farewell, p. 82.
6 Rupert Lockwood, Ship to Shore, p. 293.

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Kalgoorlie Miner (WA), 29 January 1929
Brisbane Courier (QLD), 29 January 1929


Images of the protest on 2 November 1928, from the Argus, 3 November 1928.