

Essay Topic; The 1949 Coal Miners Strike.

The national miners' stoppage of 1949 was a strike brought on by numerous issues and earlier unresolved disputes. The coal miners were finding that the means to gain improvements in their industry were becoming less and less. In 1948 the Miners Federation of Australia lodged an application to the Coal Industry Tribunal for alterations in miners conditions, two major issues being, long service leave and the 35 hour week. The hearing was suspended and so began the struggle resulting in a seven week strike causing swift and severe repercussions over the entire country.

June 27th, 1949 23,000 workers began a national miners strike. This was the result of a claim by the unions for long service leave of 3 months for every 7 years of service and a proposed 35 hour week, this was a continuing fight which had been going on for 18 months. (1) Unions were also concerned regarding large introduction of mechanical methods underground, which were increasing the danger to lives, the introduction of incentives for coal production in the form of bonuses, and the introduction of shift work. All these changes were against long standing established practices. (2) Unions felt a sense of loss of previous control over miners conditions and therefore felt that a definite stand was required to make any progress. A meeting held on June 16th, 1949 between the Coal owners, the Coal Board, Commonwealth Government and New South Wales Government concluded by rejecting all claims made by the Miners Federation. Unions held meetings immediately and votes taken were in favor of striking. On June 27th, 8877 votes were taken and all work in every mine across the nation ceased. (3)

Due to the high economical dependency of Australia's society in the 1940's the effects of the stoppage were drastically sudden. All industry was forced to cut consumption by 50%, domestic cuts were 75% of gas and electricity and 50% of transport services. (4)

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- (1) ROSS, Edgar. A History of the Miners Federation. 1970 Sydney. pg 41
- (2) *ibid.* pg 418
- (3) *ibid.* pg 421

On June 29th, the Commonwealth Government under the Prime Minister, Ben Chifley, brought in a National Emergency Bill providing for the freezing of Union funds. (5) The introduction of this new legislation meant unions could not access their funds and therefore could not provide relief for striking miners families. Shopkeepers could be arrested and jailed if caught giving credit to Miners and their families. Penalties were as high as £100 or 6 months jail. (6)

Upon the Bill being passed, officials of the Miners Federation and Fed. Ironworkers Association withdrew a sum of £54,215 from union funds in retaliation to the new law. These funds were to be used for relief for the duration of the stoppage, however, legislation was passed retrospective to June 16 thus making officials liable for prosecution. All men involved were summonsed to appear in court before the Arbitration Commission. J.H. King, secretary of the Western District Federation was charged with contempt of court, when refusing to answer questions regarding the whereabouts of the money. His sentence was 1 month jail at Long Bay. King was again brought before the courts and sentenced to a further year for refusing to answer relevant questions. In the following days to Kings jailing, a further 6 officials were given 1 year sentences and others recieved fines of £100 each. The National Emergency Bill was seen as an attempt to starve miners back to work. (7)

Community spirit was relied upon for survival of the miners. The women were forced to ban together in an attempt to help families through. Many set up soup houses to feed children and distribute fresh vegetable and relief food. Rallies were held, and various demonstrations which women often chose to participate in, in support of their husbands. Depots were set up throughout the Hunter Valley where donations of food and grocery supplies were being accepted, often from storekeepers who were unable to help through credit. This food was distributed through the region as most families were left completely penniless as no income was coming in.

(4) Deery. Labour in Conflict, the 1949 Coal Strike. 1978. Pg. 63

(5) Greenwood. G. A Social and Political History. Angus + Robertson. 1977. Pg. 423

(6) Deery. Labour in conflict, The 1949 Coal Strike. 1978. Pg. 49

(7) Ross. E. A History of The Miners' Federation in Australia. 1970 Sydney. Pg 424

As coal supplies ran low rapidly, and the emergency services were finding it difficult to operate under such stringent cuts, Chifley made a decision to issue a request to the Land Transport Group of New South Wales, to agree to union labour, to shift coal from the Northern and Western coalfields. On July 14 a meeting of New South Wales State Council and Australian Railways Union resulted in the agreement that coal at grass be lifted and used for essential services. (8) The coal lift support by the unions signified a general support for the Labor Government actions, and on July 20th, 20,000 tons of coal was transported, under strict police protection. Again a week later a second lift was underway, resulting in a further 16,000 tons removed from Ben Bullen. (9) Although this was a blow to the miners, it was of no consequence to the strike as the amount moved was insufficient to break the stop work action.

The next major attempt by the Government to break the strike was what the unions had been fearing, on August 1, between 1300 and 1400 troops began mining coal. Production was so high the miners began to lose confidence of the expected success of the stop work action and began to doubt the Federation. The realisation that coal production was well underway again instilled fear in the Miners for the safety of their jobs. The federation offered the Government a final offer to meet and discuss the claims. The government refused to meet the officials, saying it was a matter for the Coal Tribunal only, and that they were making plans for a further 8 mines to be re-opened and worked by troops unless a move was made by the miners to return to work. (9)

Breaks in the strike began as Union officials held aggregate meetings around the districts. Men were rapidly losing confidence in the Federation. Muswellbrook miners were the first to breakaway from the union with a decision to return to work. Meetings were held nation wide on August 10th, resulting in a vote to return to work by all miners. This was a major defeat for the Miners Federation, as it was the

(8) Deery. Labour in Conflict, The 1949 Coal Strike. 1978. Pg. 69.

(9) ibid. pg. 70

(10) Ross. E. A History of the Miners Federation in Aust. 1970 Sydney Pg. 427

(11) ibid. pg. 430

first time since 1929, that union directives had been rejected, and by such a large number. The counts were 6974 to return to work and 2378 to stay on strike. (10)

The factors leading to the defeat of the Federation were varied, although a major reason for the lack of commitment by the Miners was the realisation that they were fighting the Government and not the coal owners. The state and many other trade unions were on the Australian Labor Party side. The Land Transport Union and the Army had proven their support by assisting the Government in attempts to break the stoppage,

The Federation was granted long service leave, not as a result of the strike, but the claim did reach the Coal Tribunal. An award was passed that at accrual of 65 shifts 13 weeks leave would be awarded, with an additional 13 weeks for further shift accrual. The leave could not be taken until 1954 and could be suspended in the case of any district strikes. All other claims, including the 35 hour week were rejected. (11)

(10) Ross E. A History of the Miners Federation in Aust. 1970. Sydney. Pg 427

(11) ibid. pg. 430

Summary of interview between Susan Moran and
Mrs Eileen Penglaze, the wife of a coal miner during
the 1949 coal strike.

The national miners stoppage of June 27th 1949, greatly affected many local families of the Newcastle area. As Newcastle was not a wealthy town and families were still recovering from the depression, the conditions of day to day life were severely altered. Mrs Eileen Penglaze, who was living at Young Rd, Lambton at the time, was the wife of a local miner, Charles Thomas. They had four children aged between seven and fifteen and were living in a housing commission house where rent was due fortnightly. Her husband had been out of work for several years due to the depression and had just taken on employment in the mines 12 months prior to the strike. With little savings and four children to feed it was a difficult time.

Credit was available unofficially from some storekeepers after Prime Minister Chifley froze the funds. Fortunately the family had a good credit account with their storekeeper, who chose to support the struggling families. The credit given was not payable until after the strike.

Transport cuts were another major problem to overcome. Mr C. Thomas was killed in an accident five weeks in to the strike. At the time his wife was in Walcha with relatives. Train services had been so heavily cut that the only way to reach her family in Newcastle was by taxi. The fare was close to £100 all of which had to be paid for.

The National Emergency Bill brought in as law two days after the commencement of the strike had terrible effects. As the family had lost the income earner usually there would have been some compensation or gratia payment. As Mr. Thomas was killed during the strike there was no access to Federation funds therefore no payment was made at all. The miners took a collection which was given to the family. It took four months before any payment of any kind was made. A miners widow pension was granted of

The inconsistency of work left families with limited income. The men could work one week and receive a full 40 hour pay, then strike for 10 days. Local miners received £18 per week for a full weeks work. This made the seven week strike worse. Families often had little in the bank and were unprepared for such a long stoppage leaving them with no income at all. As well as trying to provide food during the strike, miners could be fined for not attending the strike meetings. The fine was . Everyone had to attend and it was compulsory to vote. No secret ballot was held, it was just a show of hands.

Many women were not in support of the extended strike as they were the ones left to feed and provide, somehow, for the family. Donations were made and some women set up soup-houses to feed children at school. The women banded together to try to help each other as much as possible.

Rental was a grave problem during the strike. With many people in housing commission homes, not only did they have to get credit for their food, but also on rent payable. The housing commission made no offer of rental assistance but kept an account of how much rent was due and the total was to be paid when the strike was over. People in private situations were in further trouble. Some landlords were not prepared to wait for their rent and some families were evicted.

The results of this seven week stoppage were often devastating for many families. Once the men returned to work they found themselves with a large debt for credit received for food, rental and other bills. Unfortunately the strike resulted in no gain for the miners and broke a lot of homes and left people in considerable debt.

Transcript of recorded interview between Susan Moran
and Mrs Eileen Penglaze.

Mrs Penglaze is the wife of a miner who was involved
in the 1949 coal strike.

INTERVIEWER: Once the strike began on June 27th, how swift were the effects on Newcastle, as far as gas, electricity and transport.

MRS PENGLAZE: It was not like now, they have stock piles all the time, there were no stock piles anywhere in them days. It used to come out of the pits and into wherever it had to go, to the BHP. They cut 50% straight away, and the gas and electricity was just about cut off and also 50% of transport services.

INTERVIEWER: I believe the transport cuts affected you personally as your husband, who was a miner, was killed during the strike and you had to get home to your family from Walcha.

MRS PENGLAZE: I think there 1 or 2 trains a week. Your grandfather was killed on the Friday and I dont think there was a train until the Monday night. I can remember in the police station in Walcha ringing Charlie Anderson at Cooks Hill to go out and see to the children. I can remember ringing him and he said how were we getting home. For me to come home I think the police were going to fly me to Sydney and then I had to get from Sydney up to Newcastle. Ron's brother was the taxi driver in Walcha and we need to come home and that was how we had to come home, in a taxi for which we had to pay.

INTERVIEWER: How did you manage once the funds were frozen obtaining food for your family, was credit still available unofficially?

MRS PENGLAZE: In those days, you didnt go to supermarkets and buy your groceries. You had a book at the corner shop and you would go and 'tick up' or 'put them on the slate' and you would go there and pick $\frac{1}{2}$ pd of butter or loaf of bread which would get put on the book. Then on pay day you would go up and pay. Mrs Bates, she had the shop near Smiths Potato Crisps at Lambton, and that was where we went. A lot of people could not even get that credit, those people knew we were good payers and you paid it back, 5 bob a week extra when they went back to work. A lot of people could not get that credit. I think the only strike thing we got

were someone donated a couple of cases or oranges, and I can remember this fellow coming to the door with a dozen oranges in a bag. People in those days were very proud and you didn't admit that you were broke. You would have bread and butter rather than admit you had nothing else to use.

INTERVIEWER: The freezing of the funds was particularly harsh in your situation where your husband had been killed during the strike, and the Federation was unable to pay you any compensation or money to live, not even a pension.

MRS PENGLAZE: When your grandfather was killed, the miners were not game to give me anything, like now they give a days pay or something, I received nothing from the Federation. The men themselves took up a collection afterwards, They were not game to cross the Government as the funds were frozen. When I applied for the miners widow pension, I got $2/6$ a week, that was how much I received as a pension with 4 children.

INTERVIEWER: How was the rent handled in those times as far as income, there would have been no way of paying rent due on either housing commission or privately rented places?

MRS PENGLAZE: With the housing commission, it was not like an ordinary landlord. When you owe a fortnights rent it took until the next fortnight to get on to the books, with ordinary landlords a fortnight overdue and you would be out, there were a lot of people in that situation. With the housing commission it accumulated. I took the money out of savings, we were paying $2/3$ at that time, and paid it up. My husband was killed on the 5th August, and I never received a pension until December.

INTERVIEWER: How did miners wages rate in those days as opposed to other income earners. These days miners wages are quite high.

MRS PENGLAZE: I suppose you could call them good wages, although they did not work all the time, you didn't always receive full pays. They might have worked

for a week then have a week on strike, they seemed to strike at the drop of a hat.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think they were afraid of the unions.

MRS PENGLAZE: They were very union oriented. When they attended meetings, there were no secret ballots, it was just a show of hands, and you had to vote. The men voted what their mates were voting, not what their wives thought about or anything. If they didnt attend the meeting they got fined 2¹⁶ out of their next pay. is not much today, but it was then.

INTERVIEWER: Did the wives support their husbands, or do you think alot of them were against it, as they were the ones who had to organise food and money.

MRS PENGLAZE: Personally I didnt support them, as I felt it was not worth, it, as they didnt get anywhere with these strikes, but alot of women were supportive but a lot didnt as it was to big a struggle in those days. Most people involved had lived through the depression and were just starting to get themselves established and get a home together.