

# War, Racism and Industrial Relations in an Australian Mining Town, 1916–1935

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## Abstract

*The goldmining town of Kalgoorlie in Western Australia has been the site of race rioting on three occasions — in 1916, 1919 and 1934. These outbursts have typically been examined as separate events, but, analysed together, they provide an opportunity to see racism, and anti-racism, as historical and social processes. In all these riots, returned soldiers, organised by a leadership often drawn from the officer class, played a significant part in harassing migrants and promoting White Australia. Through this lens, an important corrective to the dominant explanation of the White Australia policy is suggested. While most historians of Australian racism portray immigration restriction as a demand successfully won by the labour movement in defence of white workers' jobs, the Kalgoorlie race riots expose a distinctly conservative case for employer 'divide and rule', anti-migrant propaganda and racist violence. Concomitantly, the local labour movement found that racial division among their ranks was a recipe for industrial defeat.*

## Introduction

Willingness to go to war, and hostility to immigrants at home, are often portrayed as typical Australian working class attitudes. Without doubt, many Australian military excursions overseas have generated their share of 'home front' victims: most recently, the sending of Australian troops to Afghanistan and Iraq has been accompanied by increased 'moral panic' about, and harassment of, local Middle Eastern residents (Poynting et al. 2004). On the whole, the labour movement has not joined this anti-Muslim chorus, constituting instead a significant component of antiwar protests (see, for example, Workers Online 2003). Nevertheless, statements by some of the more outspokenly nationalist union officials about the unwanted presence of 'illegal' and 'cheap' workers locally, and about the sending of 'Australian' jobs overseas, are a worrying indicator that the political victories won by anti-racists within the movement may be reversible<sup>1</sup>. Therefore, an assessment of past challenges to racist ideology

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within the labour movement has particular contemporary relevance. It is important to challenge the dominant view, in the historiography of Australian racism, that support for migrant exclusion was a product of labour movement agitation against increased competition for jobs.

Markey's (1990: 580–81) characterisation exemplifies the dominant analysis: '[d]islike of foreigners [was a] national working-class characteristic'. With acceptance of this view widespread until quite recently, there have been lamentably few attempts to explain periodic working-class campaigns containing anti-racist elements and to incorporate them into a wider theoretical perspective (for exceptions, see Martinez 1999, 2001; Gregson 2001, 2003, 2004; Small 2001). Industrial struggles against racism date back at least to campaigns by Darwin waterside workers before World War Two against Dutch imperialism in Indonesia, to union support for Aboriginal workers from Noonkambah to Wave Hill, and to the actions of Broken Hill miners in the inter-war period. These all call into question current ahistorical and teleological assumptions that the adoption of 'enlightened' and 'educated' attitudes is a recent phenomenon (Lockwood 1982; Hawke and Gallagher 1989; Riddett 1997; Martinez 1999; Ellem and Shields 2000). In contrast, this article suggests that, far from being universally hostile, labour movement attitudes towards immigrants have always had a fluidity and indeterminacy not often acknowledged in the historiography of racism. Concomitantly, examples of governments past and present victimising migrants and introducing discriminatory legislation, alongside employer groups using 'divide and rule' strategies to isolate migrants and drive down wages, suggest that these social forces have played a significant role in the creation of a racist hegemony.

Acknowledgement and evaluation of a conservative racist agenda provides an important qualification to the common assertion that the labour movement has been the principal force behind immigration restriction and migrant harassment campaigns.<sup>2</sup> Whilst this Kalgoorlie-based case study shows the labour movement to have engaged in a campaign of racist exclusion against many of its own members, it also brings to light hitherto hidden signs of worker opposition to the ideological hegemony of the White Australia policy and wartime xenophobia. In later disputes, unionists recognised that the recruitment and involvement of migrant workers was vital to industrial success, while racism was anathema to union strength and solidarity. On the other hand, this case study also demonstrates a conservative exclusionary agenda at work, based on the role of organised returned soldiers in Kalgoorlie. Although there was early controversy within the local sub-branch of the Returned Soldiers Association (RSA) about how best to defend wages and working conditions, the RSA was united against the presence of migrants on the mines, arguing that soldiers had laid down their lives 'for their country's liberty and race purity'.<sup>3</sup>

While today's Returned and Services League (RSL) may not enjoy the same level of political influence that did the Federal Returned Sailors and Soldiers' Imperial League of Australia (RSSILA) in the inter-war period, it is arguable that the more general militarisation of public debate in the current 'war against terror' has had analogous ramifications for migrant 'outgroups' (Lake 2006:

15–6).<sup>4</sup> Further, by examining the roles played by organic local groupings such as the union movement, various employer groupings and returned soldier organisations, we can observe racism not as a disembodied set of ideas in people's heads, but as part of a social process, affected by the material and political interests of organised activists and the ebb and flow of class struggle.

### **Wartime Persecution of 'Enemy Aliens'**

In Australia, the outbreak of war in 1914 was the catalyst for a rising tide of racism against many non-British migrants, alongside the demonisation of anti-war activists. Racism and anti-radicalism went hand in hand. As Evans (1987: 3) noted, 'anti-Germanism provided a fresh impetus for an intensified form of alien and radical scapegoating'. The Prime Minister, W.M. Hughes, had, for some time, been leading a fierce campaign against the Industrial Workers of World, branding its migrant members as 'German agents' and denouncing its 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, blocked from transferring land, prevented from gaining public service employment, forbidden to change their names without permission, and refused membership of proprietary clubs. The sale of goods produced in enemy countries was also prohibited (Commonwealth Official Yearbook 1916: 1004, 1918: 1042; Scott 1936: 112–3). In McKernan's (1980) view, the scapegoating of migrants was integral to manufacturing a sense of danger and urgency on the homefront.

The formation of the RSSILA, a federal body of returned servicemen, took place in 1916, adding another voice to the nationalist clamour. As Kristianson (1966: xxviii) put it, '[e]ver since its formation ... the League has put to the Commonwealth government demands with regard to defence, immigration and creeds and organizations seen as subversive to the maintenance of the Australian way of life.' Using both lobbying methods and 'direct action', its leading officials, often drawn from the officer strata of the former AIF,<sup>5</sup> fought for their vision of a united, orderly, white nation. Despite initial fears that the repatriation of thousands of organised, militarised troops might seriously disrupt life on the home front, the RSSILA leadership used the rhetoric of cross-class trench camaraderie to organise a small but significant number of veterans into an association that would provide an important conservative influence in the workplace, the classroom and the wider community (White 1981: 137; Cain 1983: 39; McQueen 1984: 213; Sekules and Rees 1986: 22; Moore 1989: 137). Many sub-branches of the RSSILA became, among other things, organising centres for anti-migrant agitation, and returned soldier propaganda about 'race loyalty' helped to sow division within the working class that fulfilled a wider anti-union agenda.

Although hostile to working class agitation for better wages and conditions in any other circumstances, by encouraging antipathy towards southern Europeans, the RSSILA leadership feigned concern about employment conditions to appease its working class constituency, weaken attempts to build trade union solidarity across 'racial barriers', and galvanise support for the White Australia

policy, while never seriously limiting the supply of cheap labour wanted by governments and local employers. Its commitment to industrial passivity was a useful tool for employer groups when both propaganda and muscle were required to defeat militant unionism.

Although the vast membership of the early RSSILA was politically heterogeneous, labour-leaning returned soldiers faced strong pressure from an officer-dominated leadership to toe a respectable line or leave. Indeed, membership density fell to little more than nine per cent of the potential constituency by the mid-1920s, ensuring that the political character of the organisation shifted rightwards (Kristianson 1966: 36; Oliver, 1993; Louis 1998). The labour movement, in comparison, was a far more 'broad church' and incorporated members with diverse and sometimes conflicting views about most things. On the question of race, the labour movement was home to those who were overtly hostile towards migrants as well as those who welcomed any unionised worker as a potential ally.

### **The 1916 Campaign Against 'Enemy Subjects' in Kalgoorlie**

Throughout 1916, the Kalgoorlie branch of the Federated Mining Employees' Association<sup>6</sup> engaged in a concerted campaign to oust fellow workers they saw as 'enemy subjects' from the mines. The union leadership made numerous requests for the internment of the mostly Slav migrants to whom they objected. When these calls went unheeded by the Federal Government, the Miners' Union resolved not to work with 'unnaturalised enemy subjects'.<sup>7</sup> A vigilance committee was empowered to question all those deemed 'enemy subjects' regarding their citizenship status. If those challenged could not produce naturalisation papers, Britisher miners would refuse to work until they had left the mine (*Kalgoorlie Miner*, 7 February 1916).<sup>8</sup> The role of the main employer organisation in this campaign had enormous significance as well. The day before the work ban was due to come into effect, Miners' Union officials met with the Chamber of Mines and the two parties agreed unanimously to make a joint representation to the Federal Government regarding the internment of the migrant workers (*Kalgoorlie Miner*, 5 February 1916).

One report suggested that the Australian miners could not bear being taunted about the recent retreat from Gallipoli, with James Cunningham, secretary of the Miners' Union, describing the political tensions underground:

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 (*Kalgoorlie Miner*, 29 January, 9 February 1916).

As Cunningham suggested, although working together created some empathy among workers, newspapers were an important source of ideas and closely read in the workplace, giving loyalist editors a wide audience (Splivalo 1982; Oliver 1995: 64). The *Kalgoorlie Miner's* editorials were littered with racist slurs against German people and the newspaper approved the targeting of local migrants considered 'suspect'. Even those who had become naturalised were untrustworthy, 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' (*Kalgoorlie Miner*, 23 March, 16 August 1916).<sup>9</sup> In response to German newspaper reports decrying the use of asphyxiating gas in warfare, the *Miner*, without an apparent sense of contradiction, sprang to the defence of the British and their allies:

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 (*Kalgoorlie Miner*, 7 July 1919).

Many local ministers used their influence to bolster support for the war as well. The Bishop of Kalgoorlie, Dr Golding-Bird, asked rhetorically whether there was any country in the world like Germany 'in which moral decay and the rapid relapse into paganism [were] so strikingly and visibly manifest?' (*Western Argus*, 22 August 1916).

The majority of migrant workers affected by the ban chose not to attend work, unwilling to provoke a strike. Ironically, subsequent reports reflected union approval of their 'commendable spirit' (*Kalgoorlie Miner*, 9 February 1916). However, the mostly Slav workers were not offered relief payments by the union, despite the fact that many were union members. Instead, officials deflected responsibility for the growing financial stress they suffered onto the alleged laxity of the Defence Department (*Kalgoorlie Miner*, 14, 30 March 1916). The *Miner* (22 March 1916) reported that many ejected workers were relying on the support of the Slav community and that some families were 'on the verge of starvation.' The Miners' Union decision put the men in an impossible position. They were barred from working locally but, because of the restrictions imposed by the *War Precautions Act*, were unable to move around freely in search of work elsewhere or to leave the country.<sup>10</sup> Even the prospect of receiving internment food and board was withheld, as the government expressed an unwilling-

ness to incarcerate working miners unless an act of disloyalty was proven. This 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 not considered security risks (*Kalgoorlie Miner*, 8 February 1916).

However, 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 and the Chamber of Commerce expressed the view that the decision had been an error of judgement with serious ramifications for the war effort (*Kalgoorlie Miner*, 28 February 1916). The mine managers turned on the union, accusing it of pursuing an 'old stalking horse', the removal of all non-Britishers from the mines (*Kalgoorlie Miner*, 1 March 1916). The *Westralian Worker* (31 March 1916) unapologetically viewed the campaign in this light, expressing consternation that migrant exclusion was causing any debate. No sympathy should be wasted on the Slavs, its editor argued, 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.' 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' migrant workers, and praised the enemy subjects for their co-operation and assisted the mine managers by advertising the vacant jobs through union channels (*Kalgoorlie Miner*, 8 February 1916). The union even suggested 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. Richard Hamilton, President of the Chamber of Mines, used the dispute to question publicly whether the constant drain of recruiting on the mine workforce was in the best interests of the war effort. While he did not want to be seen putting his own sectional interest before the national imperative, he maintained that Kalgoorlie miners were better left to 'do their bit' underground (*Kalgoorlie Miner* 22, 29 March 1916). As Fischer (1988: 11) pointed out, the mine managers promoted a simple and convenient equation — that production plus profit equalled patriotism.

Tabili (1994:7) has argued that some historians exhibit a persistent tendency to treat official resolutions and policies as representative of organisational consensus. In particular, she notes a common assumption that '[t]he motives of the white rank and file [can be] extrapolated from those of union leadership'. Equally, Lunn (1985: 3) advises that union resolutions 'should be the starting point of any investigation of labour attitudes to race and immigration, not the conclusion'. There were signs that, while not siding with the mine managers, some members contested their union's exclusionary policies. One shop steward, Bruce McGay, blamed two leading officials for pushing the racist resolution, arguing that members would have 'let the matter drop', if not for the incitement of these two men (*Kalgoorlie Miner*, 24 March 1916). However, several months later, the local *Argus* (4 July 1916) newspaper informed readers that storms of

protest had greeted union reports that one of these officials had successfully moved a motion at the annual conference of the Miners' Federation decrying 'racial dissatisfaction' as detrimental to the union movement's best interests. In a Letter to the Editor, 'Britisher' expressed disgust at the union's racism:

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, nucleating in that spirit which we condemn in the Prussian mind — megalomania (*Kalgoorlie Miner*, 25 March 1916).

Another member argued that unionists should offer friendship to 'any man who has to earn his living in dirty smoky holes' and felt 'ashamed to meet men who are suffering by this one-eyed policy of the union' (*Kalgoorlie Miner*, 27 March 1916). While the evidence regarding these debates is not conclusive, it does at least suggest that there *was* a debate, a situation not often acknowledged in labour movement histories.

Of the two hundred migrant workers ejected from their jobs, the vast majority were shovellers and truckers, illustrating a clear division of labour brought about by employer recruitment practices. The Chamber of Mines reinforced workplace ethnic segmentation by arguing that finding replacements for the dismissed workers would be difficult, as only foreigners were 'willing' to do the difficult and dirty work (*Kalgoorlie Miner*, 9 February 1916). 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' (Chamber of Mines 1916: 5; *Westralian Worker*, 3 March 1916). However, in a Letter to the Editor, one trucker described the dirty and dangerous working conditions of shovellers and truckers, maintaining that mine managers would have no trouble getting workers if they improved the labour process. The relatively minor cost of laying, cleaning and repairing the lines, he argued, would obviate the need for 'a modern Samson to push a truck on them'. Bad conditions were not the fault of migrant workers, as he saw it, because many were unable to get employment elsewhere and had little choice but to take mine labouring jobs with poor wages and conditions (*Kalgoorlie Miner*, 14 February 1916).

Towards the end of August, the union campaign took a new turn. Until then, union officials had refused all entreaties from Federal and State Governments and from the Chamber of Mines to make a distinction between loyal and disloyal enemy subjects. When some mine managers began to re-employ Slav workers, 2,700 miners walked off the job. Once production had stopped, however, more serious attempts to resolve the dispute took place (*Kalgoorlie Miner*, 25, 29 August 1916). The Minister for Mines, R.T. Robinson, proposed a five-member Royal Commission be established to investigate each of the workers to whom the Miners' Union objected, in order to uncover 'disloyal' ele-

ments. 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 (*Kalgoorlie Miner*, 3 November 1916). As a device to get the miners back to work, the Royal Commission was a success. The investigation permitted re-employment of most banned workers and, at the same time, reinforced the Government's policy regarding the persecution of 'enemy subjects'.

## The Role of Organised Returned Soldiers

Of all the Australian states, Western Australia sent most men per head of population to war and Welborn's figures suggest that as many as twelve per cent of Western Australia's soldiers enlisted on the goldfields alone (Welborn 1982: 191; Mordike 1990: 4; Bolton 1994: 11; Oliver 1995: 32). Returned soldiers came from all walks of life and, unsurprisingly, the early RSSILA membership was divided on a range of political questions. While some returned soldier activists pushed the League to lobby about the cost of living, unemployment, and repudiation of the national debt, the RSSILA leadership opposed all motions that smacked of opposition to 'responsible Government and the safety and security of the Australian people' (*West Australian*, 20 January 1919). The WA State President, Colonel Lamb, labelled internal dissension as 'unfortunate' at a time when, as he pointed out, the leadership was trying to cultivate the regard of politicians and employers and simultaneously marginalise the claims of rival organisations (*West Australian*, 1 May 1918).

Although returned soldiers stood on both sides of union barricades, the RSSILA helped form groups of loyalists to oppose domestic labour unrest and, contrary to the notion that it protected the welfare of ex-servicemen, RSSILA leadership was more concerned to contain working-class returned soldier anger at government repatriation policies (Brown 1981: 73–78). Looking back, one prominent leader of the Western Australian branch noted that, after 1921, 'there was a marked falling-off in the membership returns' (Collett 1929: 17), which the State Executive attributed to returned soldier apathy. Later, it would become the official orthodoxy that it was the radicals who had been responsible for declining membership. Colonel Collett remarked that the League's troubles were 'in part, due to the intrusion of loud-voiced demagogues ... whose very presence kept many decent people away' (*Reveille*, 31 October 1928). The membership would diversify again as unemployment rose in the late 1920s and returned men looked to the RSSILA for job placement and relief money, but by then the conservative dominance of the leadership was well-established. Nevertheless, in its attempts to build membership from a largely working-class constituency, the RSSILA insisted it was 'non-political' and that its support for immigration restriction was evidence of its concern for working-class living standards. Even in its first year of operation, the Returned Soldiers' Association sent a delegation to the Premier, Frank Wilson, asking for, among other things, the dismissal of all enemy aliens from government jobs (*West Australian*, 17 February 1917).



During the war, soldier send-offs in Kalgoorlie had occasioned militant speeches, rousing band music and much fanfare, but preparations for the men's return were far less systematic. There was a push to repatriate soldiers to regional centres to prevent them from congregating in the city centre, where their discontent might encourage collective militancy and prejudice recruiting efforts. In the words of the War Council, this plan would 'overcome the difficulty of an accumulation of men in the city, and result in getting them out to the country districts, which is much to be desired, both in the interests of the men and country as a whole' (*Kalgoorlie Miner*, 22 July 1916). For its part, the Kalgoorlie Council called a public meeting to discuss the creation of employment opportunities that would help, some felt, 'to keep them from getting into the habit of loafing about the town', because only '[a] limited number of employers have been found who have been willing to take such men on and give them light duties, paying them the current minimum rate of wages' (*Kalgoorlie Miner*, 18 July 1916).

One Letter to the Editor proposed that patriotic citizens fund a soldiers' meeting place — 'a club house without the beer', as he primly described it (*Kalgoorlie Miner*, 24 February 1916).<sup>11</sup> Another alluded to the consequences of leaving returned men unoccupied, arguing that 'the lads [were] hardly to blame' for getting up to mischief if the town did not repay their debt in the form of diverting amenities (*The Sun*, 26 March 1916). Under the supervision of the Red Cross Society and its Honorary Secretary, Mrs H.N. Curle Smith, a Soldiers' Club was set up and a sub-committee formed to organise the facilities and a committee of women was given 'the privilege of organising the catering' (*Kalgoorlie Miner*, 28 March 1916). The Kalgoorlie Chamber of Commerce provided new clubrooms in 1919. Visiting the goldfields shortly after they were opened, Acting Prime Minister Watt inspected the facilities, remarking that they 'would promote feelings of good fellowship among returned men, and tend to keep them within the ranks of useful, loyal citizens'. Reflecting the ruling class apprehension and class polarisation of the post-Russian Revolution period, Watt surmised that those who 'lived under the kindly influence of institutes like the one in Kalgoorlie would be the very last to become Bolsheviks' (*Kalgoorlie Miner*, 8, 22 August 1919).

Returned soldier harassment of migrants was a recurrent feature of wartime xenophobia and, while leading citizens and newspaper editorials 'tut-tutted' about ruffian behaviour and the need for law and order, perpetrators were often treated leniently by the court system (Oliver 1990). In October 1916, two such cases were brought before Mr Walter, the magistrate of the Kalgoorlie Police Court. One young soldier had stolen several valuable items from one Siegfried Christian Larsen. Although the soldier pleaded guilty, Walter surmised he had not intended to steal and gave him a six-month good behaviour bond. Just two months previously, Judge Walter's only son had been killed in France (*Western Argus*, 22 August 1916). In another incident, a mob of thirty returned soldiers raided the lodging-house of a German man, Richard Krahn. According to one report, they 'pulled down portions of [an] iron fence, burst open the front door and smashed everything they could lay hands on. Many articles were scattered

about the street' and a long list of items was reported missing (*West Australian*, 2 October 1916; *Western Argus*, 3 October 1916). A returned soldier appeared in court over this incident, charged with intent to steal. The magistrate lectured him about his actions being a discredit to the army he had served, stating that his behaviour smacked of 'a trick caught from the Germans', and then allowed him to go (*Kalgoorlie Miner*, 4 October 1916).

A few months later, local migrants were again the victims of war-inspired racism in one of the earlier outbreaks of returned soldier violence in Australia (Rawson 1968; Evans 1988). 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 (*Kalgoorlie Miner*, 8 December 1916). Soon afterwards, a number of Kalgoorlie residents formed a spiteful mob that 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 youths, gathered near the Town Hall and, led by a soldier with a whistle, smashed the windows of three Greek shops in Cassidy Street (Gilchrist 1997: 23).

When every Greek-owned business in Kalgoorlie had been destroyed, some of the incendiarys travelled by tram to nearby Boulder to attack more migrant businesses and homes.

In the aftermath of the rioting, more than forty arrests were made. When those accused faced courts, the attitudes of the police and the judiciary revealed a distinct clemency towards outbursts of returned soldier 'patriotism'. Those found guilty of rioting-related offences were most commonly fined, but two men charged with theft received prison sentences. Giving evidence in the prosecution case against William Griffen for unlawful possession, Detective-Sergeant Dempsey argued that the accused had not committed theft 'by reason of any excess of patriotic spirit' but was motivated 'solely to benefit himself', as if race rioting was a lesser offence (*Kalgoorlie Miner*, 11–12 December 1916; *Western Argus*, 26 December 1916; Gilchrist 1997: 25). Griffen received a custodial sentence. The other man charged with intent to steal was Silvio Neso. When Neso's lawyer pleaded that a fine might be sufficient punishment, the judge replied, 'A fine will not meet the case. It was not a matter of a patriotic person excitedly smashing up property', and sentenced Neso to two months' gaol (*Western Argus*, 26 December 1916). Robert James Tucker, on the other hand, a returned soldier identified as one of the riot's ringleaders, who had used a whistle to direct and incite the mob, was seen throwing a rock through a plate-glass window, and who had incited the mob to rescue a man who was being arrested, was fined. In the judge's opinion, Tucker's 'willingness to serve his country' justified lenient treatment (*West Australian*, 29 December 1916).

The *Kalgoorlie Miner* reportage gave detailed descriptions of the riot and the subsequent court appearances of those arrested, without mentioning that the ringleaders of the violence were principally returned soldiers. Similarly, returned soldier involvement was downplayed by government authorities who

were anxious to avoid responsibility for compensation claims, although the Acting Premier of Western Australia, Henry Lefroy, did admit that returned soldiers were ‘the ringleaders in almost every case of disorder of this nature’ (Yiannakis 1996: 207).

### Racism in Kalgoorlie in the Inter-War Years

In 1919, a further outbreak of racist violence, this time against Italians on the mines, saw returned soldiers leading hostilities. Using the stabbing of a 22 year old veteran by an Italian man as justification, returned soldiers rallied at the Kalgoorlie RSA clubrooms and then marched against Italian businesses and homes (Murray 1982: 27). On the basis of an argument that the protest was in defence of jobs for returned soldiers, single Italian men were ordered to leave town or face physical ejection. The WA Police Commissioner sympathised with the RSA militants, describing their actions as ‘lawful compulsion’ and, far from acting in defence of Italian victims, local police appear to have done little beyond advising the migrants that it was in their best interests to leave (Oliver 1995: 156–60). Local newspapers, too, opposed the presence of Italian workers in the town and, while distancing themselves from the violence, expressed open sympathy with the aims of the returned soldiers. One editor lamented that ‘[t]he fate of the community... depends on the goodwill of the Dagoes’, maintaining that their presence ‘render[ed] the preservation of conditions of peace impossible’ (*The Sun*, 17 August 1919).

On this occasion, however, the largest union on the goldfields, the Australian Workers Union (AWU), into which the miners were now organised, did not support migrant exclusion. Instead, it denounced the actions of the rioters and pledged solidarity with all migrant union members and their families. At a meeting of the mining division of the union, delegates passed a resolution against the riots and the ‘spineless manner in which [the Government has] acted in not providing protection for citizens of this community’. They demanded the government ‘withdraw immediately the instructions given for the Italians to leave the district’ (*Westralian Worker* 22 August 1919). Murray has argued that the AWU officials supported the migrant workers in a cynical attempt to build union membership and become the sole representative of mine labour, against the rival claims of a Nationalist union, the Federated Miners Union (FMU), comprising principally returned soldiers (Murray 1982: 30).<sup>12</sup> While this may have been partially so, the AWU’s support for migrant workers was a long way from the exclusionary position it had taken against Slav workers three years earlier and suggests that solidarity across perceived racial boundaries was developing.

Later that year, the AWU locked horns with its real industrial rival, going on strike against the ‘bogus unionists’ of the FMU (Oliver 1998). Again, the Kalgoorlie RSA sub-branch became a focal point as veteran members rallied at the clubrooms to sign up as ‘special constables’ or strike breakers. For its part, the Chamber of Mines was wholly in support of the returned soldiers, claiming that they were merely ‘in pursuit of their lawful avocations’ against the ‘degenerates’ in the AWU. However, not all returned soldiers answered the call.

A meeting of the nearby Boulder RSA sub-branch censured the Kalgoorlie RSA officials 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' (*The Sun*, 9 November 1919). Returned soldier workers should join the AWU, the Boulder veterans argued (*West Australian* 8 November 1919).

McQueen (1984: 214) has argued that these two goldfields sub-branches were divided by class — that the Kalgoorlie RSA was dominated by an extensive mercantile and mine management constituency, whereas the Boulder sub-branch had a far more proletarian character, being located in the heart of a working-class residential area. In this year of post-war flux, the evidence suggests significant numbers of returned soldiers opposed industrial scabbery by their former 'comrades' while, at the same time, AWU members (many of them returned soldiers themselves) were acknowledging migrant workers as industrial allies. The RSA, however, both at State and local level, continued to oppose the presence of 'aliens' on the mines. In 1919, it lobbied the Federal Government for the retention of the White Australia policy without amendment<sup>13</sup> and, at the RSSILA's Federal Congress in 1922, a strongly worded resolution criticised 'coloured immigration' and confirmed the organisation's 'unswerving loyalty' to a 'White Australia' (Duncan 1961: 109). The Kalgoorlie sub-branch of the RSSILA also resolved: 'That immigrants and slackers be debarred from entering Australia while our soldiers are still away.'<sup>14</sup>

A third incidence of race rioting in Kalgoorlie took place fifteen years later in 1934 (Gregson 2001). Angered by the death of a white miner outside an Italian-run hotel, hundreds of rioters looted and burned migrant-owned homes and businesses in Kalgoorlie and Boulder over two successive evenings. Indeed, it is the sustained nature of the rioting that most invites questions regarding social forces supporting the mobilisation. On the morning after the first night of rioting, large street meetings at several pit-heads resolved not to work until all 'unnaturalised foreigners' had been sacked from their jobs. The strikes were organised by a seven-member 'unofficial miners' committee'; one member of this committee was an AWU shop steward and at least two were returned soldiers. While most accounts of the riots blame union antipathy towards migrants and 'competition for jobs' for the outbreak of violence (Gerritsen 1969; Bertola 1978), the evidence does not support this conclusion. AWU officials condemned the strike, argued for a return to work and organised some 300 miners into a night patrol for the prevention of further violence. They also assisted with the distribution of food and water to distressed migrant families hiding in the surrounding bushland. While some miners undoubtedly participated in the riots, the vast majority did not.

Organised returned soldiers played a clandestine role in fanning the rioting while not being prepared to support migrant exclusion as openly as they had in the past. In stark contrast to the class-conscious position of the Boulder RSA in 1919, in 1934 it was reported that 'a tall elderly man' led a group of youthful rioters to the Returned Soldiers League hall in Boulder in order to distribute guns among them (*Kalgoorlie Miner* 31 January 1934).<sup>15</sup> A report on the riots in the League's monthly newsletter was a masterpiece of dissembling innuendo.

While disassociating its members from support for open violence and never admitting that some members took part, the *Kalgoorlie Digger* (February 1934) supported action against the presence of migrants on the mines and excused the lack of open veteran involvement in the riots as resulting from the unpopularity of their actions in 1919 when soldiers had last 'tried to assist the public'. The sub-branch was, however, still active on the ideological front. At the 1934 State Congress, the Kalgoorlie delegate, Lieutenant-Colonel Fairley, successfully moved a motion '[t]hat representations be made to the State Parliament on the question of restriction of alien labour in mining and other industries in order that the decision of a previous Congress on this matter be given effect to'. At this time, Fairley was Secretary of the Kalgoorlie sub-branch and editor of the *Kalgoorlie Digger* (*Listening Post*, 26 October 1934).

A further indication of how far labour movement attitudes had shifted regarding migrant workers was palpable in an industrial dispute which took place one year later. In a dispute over working hours on the mines, 6,000 workers went on strike in Kalgoorlie and other Western Australian mining centres, including at the Lake View and Star and Sons of Gwalia mines, where many migrant workers were employed. Fundraising activities in support of the strike involved Britisher and migrant workers alike, prompting *Workers' Weekly* to report gushingly:

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 (*Workers' Weekly*, 1 February 1935).

After six weeks out, the strikers were victorious and, in the course of the dispute, union membership density which had stood at 40 per cent at the commencement of the strike rose to 72 per cent by the time members returned to work (Bertola 1993: 239).

Although AWU officials were not committed internationalists, they recognised that building a powerful union required the mass recruitment of workers, regardless of nationality. As well as denouncing the race rioters in 1934, union leaders expressed a principled 'determination to give the union ticket to all members irrespective of nationality' (*West Australian*, 2 February 1934). In addition, Communist Party (CPA) members on the goldfields — although few in number — won a hearing for their argument that workers should strike against the mining employers, not their fellow workers. The threat of being outflanked by the left on the 'race question' put pressure on more conservative union officials to adopt a more inclusive attitude towards migrant workers. Indeed, a leading CPA member, Bronc Finlay, who had been a prominent opponent of the 1934 riots, was elected to the AWU Mining Division leadership in 1938 (Gregson 2003: 192). The role of industrial disputation in bringing workers together over common causes helped to overcome perceived divisions. Despite the growth of highly competitive and industrially divisive tribute mining, many migrant workers shared a political and industrial commitment to unionism with their Britisher counterparts. While some writers have emphasised the

marginalisation of migrants on the mines, an examination of AWU membership records for the mid-1930s suggest that perhaps twenty per cent of AWU members had a non-Britisher background throughout this period, roughly analogous to the numerical presence of migrant workers in the community (Gregson 2001: 191–2). In addition, membership density almost doubled from approximately 40 per cent in early 1934 to over 72 per cent in March 1935.

## Conclusion

Racism is more commonly depicted as part of a competitive struggle *within* classes, rather than as a tool used by government and employers in the rivalry *between* classes. The racist hiring practices of many employers and the sympathetic responses of some trade unionists to their migrant counterparts rarely feature in the existing historiography of the period. In reality, mine employers were not benign influences in local race debates — on the one hand, they held out British employment preference as an industrial ‘carrot’ they hoped would distract local workers from the real source of their employment woes. On the other hand, they openly hired migrant workers on the basis that dirty, low-skilled, poorly-paid labouring jobs around the mines were ideally suited to southern Europeans. In this way, employers attempted to isolate southern Europeans from unionised Britisher workers, thereby limiting opportunities for the kind of fraternisation that might lead to united struggles for improved wages and conditions. In the eyes of the employers, here was the ‘stick’ — as long as Britisher workers saw their migrant counterparts as ‘disloyal’ and ‘rate-busting’, the potential for strong unionism might be constrained.

Despite the overwhelming onslaught of racist messages delivered through legislation, newspaper editorials, employer hiring practices and through many other means, considerable resistance to racial division came from within the labour movement, challenging divisive management strategies. While the 1916 union resolution against migrant workers might be considered standard labour movement strategy, this case study shows that unionised workers were not unanimous supporters of racist exclusion and that some workers were prepared to argue in support of their Slav counterparts. However, while in all three race riots, returned soldiers demonstrated their continued commitment to a form of ‘ethnic cleansing’, the labour movement gave increased support to their migrant co-workers against RSL and employer racism. Where the small signs of opposition to migrant exclusion were isolated in 1916, in the later riots they became official union policy.

More than twenty years ago, Burgmann encouraged historians to look away from those falsely-conscious workers who sought racist ‘solutions’ to their industrial problems. She urged further examination of ruling class interest in racial division in order to understand its ideological ramifications within the working class. Here, it is argued that the role of the organisation now known as the RSL in local race debates is a revealing window into the dynamics of race relations. The officer-dominated leadership deliberately galvanised a small but important group of returned soldiers for continued service to ‘the nation’. Part of their role was to propagandise about a range of conservative policies, includ-

ing that of White Australia. Indeed, as Duncan (1961: 109) noted, even in 1958 when the White Australia policy was beginning to attract criticism from other sections of society for its racist underpinnings, the RSL stood firm. Sir George Holland, its then-president, announced to the press and the State Branches that the support for 'White Australia' expressed in the 1922 resolution remained current policy. The RSL leadership promoted the ideology behind the White Australia policy in the way that this policy had always been intended—as a piece of legislation that purported to defend working class wages and conditions while fundamentally seeking collaboration between white workers and their white employers. In this way, it could mask a concomitant hostility towards militant trade unionism behind calls for immigration restriction in the 'interests' of local workers.

## Notes

1. See for example (CFMEU 1999); Speech: Warren Smith, Secretary, MUA Sydney Branch, APEC Protest Rally, 8 September 2007.
2. In a survey of the relevant literature, Iacovetta, Quinlan and Radforth, for example, suggest national immigration policy was set by a coalition of trade unionists and the urban and rural middle class (Iacovetta et al. 1996: 97). Burgmann's (1978) work has been, until quite recently, something of a lone voice against this hegemony.
3. Correspondence: Western Australian branch of the RSSILA to Acting PM Alf Watt, 12 March 1919, NAA: A1/15, 1919/4097.
4. Returned service organisations have had a plethora of names, name changes and misnomers. In this article, I refer to the Returned Soldiers' Association (RSA) that became the Western Australian Branch of the federally recognised Returned Sailors and Soldiers' Imperial League of Australia (RSSILA) in 1918. The organisation discussed here should not be confused with another WA grouping of returned soldiers, also known as the RSA, formed by left-wing soldiers ostracised from the RSSILA (Oliver 1993: 29–35). The organisation referred to herein is currently known as the Returned and Services League or, more commonly, the RSL.
5. The AIF leadership, according to Robson, was overwhelmingly Protestant and primarily drawn from a narrow range of occupations—'commerce, clerical, professional and pre-war army' (Robson 1973: 748–9; McQuilton 2000, 2001).
6. 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.
7. Some of these workers were nationals of countries like Serbia and Montenegro, that had been forcibly incorporated into the Austro-Hungarian Empire.
8. 'Britisher' was a contemporaneous term denoting people of Anglo-Celtic origin, both Australian and British. While it is useful to employ this term to

- reflect the perceived ethnic boundaries, its racial connotations are rejected. The terms 'migrant' and 'foreigner' refer exclusively to non-Britishers.
9. This was clearly a play on Tom Barker's famous phrase, 'the microbe of patriotism'. *Direct Action*, 10 August 1914.
  10. *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.
  11. These attitudes mirror those of anxious 'do-gooders' around the country (see King 1994).
  12. The FMU was a defunct union, revitalised in 1916–7 by those who left the labour movement in the 1916 Australian Labor Party split. Its secretary claimed FMU membership totalled more than three hundred workers, of whom more than fifty were returned soldiers (*Kalgoorlie Miner*, 13 November 1919).
  13. Correspondence: Western Australian branch of the RSSILA to Acting PM Alf Watt, 12 March 1919, NAA: A1/15, 1919/4097, National Archives, ACT.
  14. Correspondence: Western Australian branch of the RSSILA to Acting PM Alf Watt, 6 January 1919, RSL Collection, MS6609, Series 1, Box 332, 600–679, National Library of Australia.
  15. While specific details of this political transformation are not known, it is suggested that the conservative influence of Federal and State leaderships through tireless anti-radical propaganda, alienation of left-leaning members and, in the last instance, expulsion of 'troublemakers', remade the Boulder sub-branch in the leadership's image.

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