Against Fascism and War

Pig Iron Bob and the Dalfram Dispute

Port Kembla, 1938

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Introduction

Celebrating the 75th Anniversary of the Dalfram Dispute

Few events in labour history have had as dramatic and profound an impact on the trade union movement and the working class as the Dalfram strike of 1938. Its legacy leaves us much more than a nickname for Australia’s longest serving Prime Minister, known thereafter as Pig Iron Bob. The actions taken by the men in Port Kembla, their families and their comrades both within and outside the region shook the foundations of the appeasement doctrine blindly followed by the Lyons conservative Government whilst fascism and imperialism knocked on Australia’s door. The legacy of these events, however, extends beyond that period to the character and orientation of the trade union movement where the principles of internationalism, class action and community militancy continue to define our movement today.

Gary Keane, Secretary,
South Coast Branch of the Maritime Union of Australia
**Against Fascism and War**

The Japanese Imperial Army invaded northern China and occupied Manchuria in 1931. The issue of fascism and war became even more concrete and urgent when fascist Italy invaded Ethiopia in north Africa towards the end of 1935. The Central Council of the Miners’ Federation, whose “Hands off China” position dated back to 1927, declared its “unflinching opposition to all Imperialist wars” and “the need for working class internationalism” to use “all forms of industrial and political action on a national and international scale” against aiding such a war “with foodstuffs, credits or ammunitions” or by “continuing political and economic relations with the countries waging Imperialistic wars”.

In December 1937, the Japanese marched into China’s capital city, Nanking. The troops methodically slaughtered half of the 600,000 civilians and soldiers in the city and systematically brutalized the living. But in the years immediately before the Second World War, Australia was governed by a conservative coalition of the United Australia Party led by Prime Minister Joe Lyons and the Country Party, led by Deputy-Prime Minister Earle Page. Their policy was to avoid confrontation with and to accommodate the demands of Germany and Japan whenever possible. Lyons believed that his personal relationship with Benito Mussolini, Italy’s fascist leader, could avert war. He died the day Italy invaded Albania.

One of Australia’s most important trading partners, Japan was a major buyer of wool, wheat, iron ore and scrap iron. Minister for External Affairs, George Pearce, told the U.S. Consul-General that every time Japan advanced into north China, Australia should rejoice. A letter to the British Foreign Secretary claimed that since the Japanese had to expand somewhere, it was best to encourage them to look north rather than Australia’s way.

But several branches of the waterside workers’ union refused to load ships with war materials for aggressor nations, including Nazi Germany which had occupied the Rhineland, and Franco’s Spain where the Civil War still raged. In September 1937, Fremantle wharfies refused to supply a Japanese whaling ship. Auckland wharfies banned the *Chifuka Maru* in protest at Japanese atrocities. The slogan ‘No Scrap for the Jap’ began to appear on wharves around the country. The Port Kembla waterside workers passed a resolution viewing “with horror the unprovoked and murderous attack of the Japanese militarists against the peace loving Chinese people. Furthermore, we as members of the Australian working class are prepared to assist the Chinese workers in their fight against Fascist Japan.”

When the ACTU called for a nation-wide boycott of all Japanese goods and a ban on the export of scrap iron to Japan, support came mainly from peace groups, the Chinese community, militant unions, some church organisations including the Legion of Youth in Wollongong, the Communist Party and some ALP branches. The South Coast Branch of
the Waterside Workers Federation (WWF) joined the boycott on Japanese goods, condemned the continuing supply of scrap iron to Japan, and pledged themselves not to load any ship with or carrying war materials for Japan. Groups of waterside workers took to the streets of Wollongong handing out leaflets and explaining to shoppers not to buy Japanese goods in local shops. Sydney wharfies walked off the *Tamon Maru* when they discovered that the scrap iron on board was destined for Japan. Bans were applied in Port Adelaide, Hobart and Brisbane.

**Fighting the Bull System**

In January 1938, the South Coast Branch of the WWF elected Ted Roach as their secretary. Born and raised in Coledale, his dad Matt a miner, during the early 1930s Roach ‘waltzed the matilda’, riding the rails in search of work, barely surviving on the 5 shillings a week dole. Before gaining employment in 1936 on the Port Kembla waterfront, he was active in the Unemployed Workers’ Movement and joined the Communist Party. Immediately after they had elected him, the branch members set about campaigning to end the vicious ‘bull system’ which operated in Australian ports.

At the whim of a supervisor, workers were hand-picked for work each day, to the disadvantage of the small, the unfit, the old, the inexperienced and the militant. The ‘bulls’, the fittest, strongest, most hardworking, got preference for work each 24-hour shift, often going back to work another shift ahead of those who had been given no work at all. One of them even worked continuously for 72 hours. The supervisors gave the best jobs to their favourites as well. Instead of wielding a shovel or lumping a sack, the petty got to operate the cranes, the winches and the hatches, constantly harrying the men working in the holds below decks or under the hook on the dock.
The South Coast Branch was fighting for the introduction of a union roster system for the Port Kembla wharves. They supported Roach’s idea to distribute the available work fairly among union members. He suggested that anyone who had worked eight hours in the previous twenty-four hours should not get further work until all who had not worked during this period were offered the chance to.

Under pressure from unionists and casual workers, the stevedoring companies agreed to the union roster system, as the branch had demanded. The union ran the roster under a strict code of conduct that imposed fines payable to the union on those who did not follow the rules of the roster, or who acted unsafely on the job. This was the first such system in Australian ports.

Casual workers were the key to the union’s victory, for it was to them that the stevedoring companies turned whenever there was work that needed doing. Non-union casuals were welcome at union meetings. The branch demanded and won a roster for them, too. WWF activists and non-union casuals worked out a strategy whereby job vacancies in the port would be filled off a union-run casuals’ roster. This meant that casuals had an equitable possibility of ongoing employment as vacancies arose. In return, the casuals refused to be ‘picked up’ ahead of union workers. As one of them, Andy Brooks, explained to the branch committee, “Although Captain Crompton has repeatedly offered to pick us up in preference to union men, we have repeatedly refused work when union labour has been available, and never at any time have we acted contrary to union principles”.

WWF South Coast Branch Secretary Ted Roach
Banning the Dalfram

Shortly after it docked in Port Melbourne, Charlie Young, a militant on the waterfront there, advised Ted Roach and Jim Healy, the General Secretary of the WWF, that he was certain a British tramp steamer bound for Port Kembla was to load pig-iron for Japan. On 15 November 1938, eight months after Hitler had occupied Austria and less than twelve months before the outbreak of World War 2, the Dalfram berthed at No. 4 jetty in Port Kembla Harbour.

The Dalfram had been chartered to take pig-iron to Kobe, Japan by Mitsui which, along with Vickers-Armstrong of England, was the controlling company for Japan Steel Works Ltd. Mitsui’s subsidiary, Japan Steel Works, was producing military materials for the undeclared war on China. The shipment from Australian Iron and Steel in Port Kembla was part of a contract by Broken Hill Proprietary Ltd (BHP) to provide 300,000 tons of pig-iron. Familiar to many people as wrought iron, this could be used to manufacture 180,000 high-explosive bombs or one million incendiary bombs. The Chairman of BHP’s Board of Directors, Harold Darling, was a prominent member of the Japan-Australia Friendship Society. He was succeeded as BHP chairman in 1938 by the nephew of the honorary Japanese consul in Melbourne.

When the ship arrived in Port Kembla the wharfies gathered. Ted Roach recalls,

I called the boys together in the lane [opposite the Wollongong Town Hall where the pick-up was] and that morning I jumped a stump and said to the boys there was a ship coming in, and there was pig-iron for Japan, and our policy is clear, ‘What do you think we should do about it?’ And of course I moved a resolution that we don’t load it, but then cautioned that we accept the work. We go back to work and commence work normally, to allow me to authenticate this information by moving amongst the crew. We didn’t want to make any mistakes. And the boys started loading this pig-iron and they were getting toey about it. By the time I had finished, about a quarter past eleven, I had been down with the Lascars, the native crews, I was convinced that they were going to Kobe. So I just walked up on deck and I said ‘Righto, boys, it’s going to Kobe’. To a man, everyone stopped, and they marched straight off the bloody ship. Hey, we had no idea we were making history.

The employer’s response was to individually harass the men as they walked off the ship. Well-drilled supervisors were ready. In an intimidating manner, they asked each person if they were refusing to work. As Roach explains, “In 1937 this type of intimidation in all probability would have been effective. But the roster and job delegates had breathed new life into the union because fear of victimisation no longer existed. The minions of the shipping companies and the BHP were contemptuously brushed aside”. The men stayed solid.
The *Dalfram* was first on the roster next day, when the men arrived at the pick-up. As other jobs in the port finished, everyone was offered the *Dalfram* until all 180 had refused to work it. Then they tried the casuals who all knocked back the job as well. This was how the port was stopped. The bosses had effectively imposed a lock-out.

![The Dalfram](image)

**Seafarers Take Action**

The day after the wharfies walked off, the crew went on strike and got in touch with the Seamen’s Union of Australia General Secretary, William Daley. They came from Yemen, India, Myanmar, Britain and one from Australia, and had seen many signs of approaching war. “We have seen” as their spokesman put it, “what Fascism was doing to the ships and people of Spain” in ports under Nazi and Italian bombardment. Daley told the crew that “no law in the world could compel them to carry the pig-iron to Japan”. The Seamen’s Union “would give them every protection they desired”.

The *Dalfram*’s officers retaliated, withholding their pay of seven months and cancelling all shore leave, turning the ship, with a clear view of the town’s lights and pubs, into a floating prison. “We are convicts”, they said. After eleven days, and only after a ferocious Force 10 storm had nearly blown the ship onto the breakwater, were the crew released. The Corrimal Women’s Relief Committee gave them the best meal they had eaten in weeks at which Ahmed Ahmeer declared they “would never take pig-iron to Japan”.

7
Another of the crew received a rousing reception from the 1,000 attending a public
protest meeting organised by the Mayor of Wollongong, Alderman Lang, when he
assured them that he and his shipmates were 100 per cent behind the wharfies. “We got
on well with the Dalfram crew”, said Bert Smith. “We used to take both the British and
Arabs to concerts, dances and other functions when they were free of the ship. At some
of these functions we would put on a keg donated by a publican. The Muslims among
them were a long way from Mecca and didn’t mind a drink or two in irreverent
Australia”.

On 1 December, Federal and State police boarded the Dalfram and pounced on a very
startled Mohammed Goulah, the leader of the stokehold crew and considered the main
obstacle to the restoration of obedience. The firemen were making sure that the
Dalfram got no steam to move to the BHP jetty in the harbour. They dragged Goulah,
who was not going quietly, down the gangway, chucked him into a police car and raced
off to Wollongong Hospital. There Dr Green certified that he was insane and under the
influence of drugs. Goulah was carted off to an insane asylum near the police station in
Darlinghurst, Sydney. Here Dr John George, a leading psychiatrist, found him to be
“quite normal” but “a bit worried”. On his release a week later, Goulah told the press, “I
will never sail a ship that carries potential war material for Japan”.

Members of the Waterside Workers’ Federation with pig iron.
Fighting the Dog Collar Act

Prime Minister Lyons had responded immediately to the stoppage, telling Parliament:

> The refusal of the waterside workers at Port Kembla to load pig-iron for Japan is regarded very seriously by the Government. The Government cannot permit the usurpation of its functions by any section of the community. It alone has the full responsibility to determine what attitude it shall adopt with regard to the Sino-Japanese dispute, and cannot allow this responsibility to be taken from it.

The Government announced unless the bans were lifted, it would enforce the Transport Workers Act. Under the provisions of the 'Dog Collar Act' as it was known, before starting work in a specified port, a worker had to obtain a licence from the Government. It stipulated that all lawful orders must be obeyed. If a wharfie then took action that the government didn’t like, such as imposing bans or going on strike, the licence could be taken away. Without the licence, there was no employment. The licence cost one shilling, the same as a dog licence.

On the same day, Robert Menzies, the Minister for Industry and Attorney-General told Parliament he had contacted the WWF national leadership to warn them to lift the ban in Port Kembla or suffer the consequences. These were dire. According to Ted Roach, the Act had been used to break the waterside strike in 1928 and the 1935 seamen’s strike, leaving nine bosses’ union branches on the waterfront, and filling half the ships on the nation’s coast with scabs (‘free labour’).

Menzies’ father was employed by the BHP, working for its General Manager Essington Lewis as an ‘adviser’ and Federal and State lobbyist. Lewis was convinced that war was coming and he thought that Australia should use the profits from arms sales to Japan to rearm Australia. By 1938 BHP was producing shells, guns and other munitions and rapidly expanding its factories around the country.

Six months earlier, a mass meeting of the Sydney Branch had passed a unanimous resolution condemning the Government but had, under the enormous pressure placed on them by the Transport Workers’ Act, loaded war materials for Japan. Not surprisingly, the threat of the Act discouraged the Sydney WWF leadership from taking a more militant position, because, according to Roach, “each time the Federation made a move, the Dog Collar Act would hunt them back to work, directed by [General Secretary] Jim Healy and the Federal Committee of Management.”

Even though he was a communist like Roach, Healy said that he “could not see eye to eye with the branch decision to strike”. He had grave concerns about taking on Essington Lewis and the BHP who were working hand-in-hand with the government. He
feared that the branch’s action “would give Lyons and company an opportunity to rush in with some kind of intimidating action”.

Ted Roach’s view was quite different. After the crew’s action had been backed by the Seamen’s Union, and the local metal workers’ union had declared their support, he told the branch, “Boys, let’s not worry. We have the trade union position lined up so strongly, we have this situation well in hand here. Penal legislation is only as dangerous as the resistance to it is weak”.

Roach phoned the COM in Melbourne and told them that the Branch members had reaffirmed their action. According to Roach,

The Committee of Management wanted to order us back to work, but, of course, Healy knew he was not dealing with the people he always dealt with. He said to the Committee of Management, “you want them back, you go down there and order them back yourselves”.

The whole COM travelled to Wollongong to persuade the South Coast branch to lift the bans, but not only did the members refuse to do so, they succeeded in convincing the COM to provide them with £1,000 for the fighting fund.

With the Dalfram cargo the first on the list, not one worker applied for the Dog Collar Act licence to work on the wharves. Roach asked a supervisor, Bunny Bourke who had told his employers he supported the ban, to take out a licence. It was burned before a crowd of supporters outside the Customs House, and a dog collar was left swinging in the breeze. Ten foremen, who under pressure took out licences, assured the Labour Council committee that “they would not stevedore with or educate scabs”. The tally clerks also refused to take out licences. Only about six staff members were prepared to do the work normally done by the wharfies.
Next Menzies sent his Parliamentary Under-Secretary, Lawson, to Wollongong to broker a deal. The WWF was not notified of the visit. A member of the branch committee rang Roach saying that there was a bloke wandering around Port Kembla claiming to represent Menzies. Lawson got on the phone and insisted that he meet the branch committee immediately for he had to fly to Melbourne that night. Roach commented on his lack of courtesy and told him he could meet the branch committee next day in Wollongong where the WWF had its office. Lawson was upset, but Roach told him that either he could meet with them tomorrow or get on his plane. Next day, Roach sneaked a Daily News reporter into the meeting, who heard Lawson say “the world stands aghast at the atrocities committed by Japan in China and I sympathise with your stand”. The Daily News came out next day with the headline “Lawson Woos the Wharfies”. He lost his job as Parliamentary Under-Secretary shortly after.

The Federal Government again threatened to use the Transport Workers’ Act to break the ban which Menzies called “a provocative act against a friendly power”. He wired the Federation on 29 November advising them that the Act would be applied to Port Kembla from 6 December if the pig-iron was not loaded. Next day at a meeting of all unionists and casuals, Menzies’ ultimatum was rejected out of hand. Roach said, “This pig-iron will be used to slaughter our own women and children and raze our own cities to the ground in Australia, in the same way as in China today, and on these grounds we have made our decision not to load the Dalfram. We recognise the consequences. The Branch members have decided definitely that they are not going to accept licences”.

Roach and Healey headed for Canberra where they met with the Leader of the ALP Opposition, John Curtin. Roach remembers it well,

Curtin lay back on a divan in his Parliament House suite, his hands behind his head. He looked at the ceiling as we delivered to him our appeal for ALP support. Then he remonstrated with us as if we were naughty boys. “You must carry out Government policy. If Labor was in power in Canberra you would have to carry out our policy and load the pig-iron. A Labor Government would insist on you carrying out our policy on trade with Japan. The Port Kembla waterside workers have no right to defy the policy of the elected Government.

He was unmoved that according to the League of Nations, 1 million Chinese were now dead.

The Port Kembla was placed under the Transport Workers’ Act on 9 December. Menzies met representatives of the ACTU and COM on 12 December in Melbourne. He intimated that if the Branch would lift the ban, he would lift the licences. A joint meeting of the COM and the South Coast branch on 16 December rejected the proposal. When the locals reported on the extent of community and union support they were receiving, the COM decided to levy all WWF members one shilling, the cost of the dog collar, each pay
to support the dispute. They telegraphed Menzies, “We are the true patriots and defenders of Australia”.

The following day, 17 December, the BHP announced that they were immediately sacking 3,500 steel workers and another 500 straight after Christmas a week later. Production, the company said, had been brought to a standstill by the dispute, and dismissals were inevitable. To Pat McHenry, the communist leader of the Port Kembla Branch of the Federated Ironworkers, and to the majority of Port Kembla steelworkers he represented, these dismissals were further evidence of the power of a “vast monopoly owned by a small gang of parasites”.

Building Community Support

When, immediately after the walk-out, Roach explained to the Illawarra Trades and Labour Council, that his members were refusing to load pig-iron because “success to the Japanese Fascist militarists in China will, according to their own statements, inspire them to further attacks on peaceful people which will include Australia”, he immediately received its whole-hearted support.

This Council fully endorses the determined stand in the cause of peace taken by the Waterside Workers’ Union, by their refusal to load pig-iron on the Dalfram for shipment to Japan for war purposes. This Council declares that the attempt to export pig-iron to Japan, undoubtedly to be used for the latter’s war of aggression against China, clearly exposes the pro-fascist policy of the Federal Government.

Very soon, stopping any attempt to shift it to another berth or to Sydney for loading, the Federated Ironworkers Association, the Shunters’ Union, the Federated Engine Drivers and Firemen’s Association, the Australian Workers’ Union and the Railways Union all pledged not to handle pig-iron. Peace groups, women’s organisations, many clergy and the Illawarra District Assembly of the ALP were backing them up, broadcasting their support on the local radio station. On November 30, the Labour Council threatened a stoppage throughout Illawarra.

Day to day organisation of the dispute was taken up by the Labour Council’s disputes committee which immediately set about reinforcing the 24-hour 7-day picket on the Dalfram to ensure that no one got on the ship or near its berth. The disputes committee quickly opened negotiations with the stevedoring companies to restart work on the three ships that were now lying idle because of the lock-out.

Within a week of the imposition of licensing, the Labour Council committee had re-established the area committees established to fight unemployment in the early 1930s, and developed during the miners’ six-week national strike for shorter hours in 1937. Set
up in many villages and towns along the South Coast, these brought people from
different unions and non-unionists together to collect and distribute funds and food,
and organise support and publicity.

Thanks to Roy Burns, Jackie Andersen, Stan Speechley and other Aboriginal men working
on the waterfront, support from the Port Kembla Aboriginal community was rock solid.
Elsie Sparks walked into the WWF office to volunteer and was soon hard at work sorting
out and replying to the deluge of correspondence from all over Australia and world.

Garages donated petrol for trucks and cars organising relief. They travelled to Gosford for
cheap oranges, to Robertson for potatoes, Moss Vale for meat and vegetables. Half a dozen relief
workers went round the South Coast stores and bakeries each day, contacting hundreds of small
businesses. Greek fish-shop proprietors were among the most generous. One gave £20, about
one month’s pay.

Hotels, wine bars, newsagents, butchers, tailors, hairdressers, electricians, bakers, chemists, hotels,
milk bars, shops dealing in babies’ wear, clothing, shoes, cakes and fruit all chipped in. Local
businesses sponsored nightly broadcasts over radio station 2WL to support the waterside
workers. According to Bert Smith, only two business people refused donations in the entire
Wollongong and Port Kembla area. “A baker named Ernie Taylor ordered the unionists off his
premises and threatened to call the police. He said wharfies were bludgers. His refusal of support cost
him a quarter of his customers”.

Sam Domoney remembers that “the response everywhere was good. We had dance nights, with
orchestras giving their services free of charge. Strikers and those locked-out were admitted free -
they had little money. Picture theatre proprietors admitted wharfies’ kids free on one night a week”.

Parties of up to thirty went rabbiting and fishing. Relief workers often went into pubs, and asked
publicans could they say a few words to the drinkers. Many donated generously. Collection boxes were rattled at Dapto, Kembla Grange and Bulli race tracks, and at
other sporting events. Speakers went far and wide to raise money, to the Riverina, to Newcastle and the northern coalfields, and over the Blue Mountains to the west.

Betty Rowland, a well-known Australian playwright, rapidly produced a play called ‘War on the Waterfront’. A squad of police arrived and shut down its premier performance before an audience of 2,000 in the Sydney Domain. When the actors from New Theatre tried again before an even bigger crowd, five were arrested, charged with breaching the Censorship Act and fined. In Wollongong, a drama group formed of supporters opened the play in Stuart Park and then took it to factory gates, pit tops, shopping centres, brickworks, beaches and country towns.

Confronting Pig Iron Bob

After the Christmas period, Bob Menzies made an attempt to settle the dispute by calling a meeting on 11 January with the Labour Council committee in Wollongong. During his visit to Europe some months previously, he had lined up clearly and publically with people like British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain who gave in to Hitler’s and Mussolini’s demands. Menzies expressed sympathy for Germany’s territorial ambitions, even saying that Germany had a “case against Czechoslovakia” and said there were “credit entries in the Nazi ledger”.

The Labour Council committee mobilised Illawarra for Menzies’ arrival. The miners had a holiday, and so did their wives and kids. Not many Aboriginal men had a powerful motor bike but Stan Speechley did, thanks to the WWF’s colour-blind roster. He waited on the escarpment and as soon as Menzies came into view, he gunned it down through the bends along the coast road, alerting demonstrators in the miners’ villages. They quickly lined rather more than the sides of the narrow road, impeding the ministerial cavalcade following after him.

When Menzies eventually arrived in Wollongong, he was met by an angry demonstration of over 1000 people at the Town Hall. He snuck through the rear entrance into the Wollongong Hotel, opposite the Town Hall. The demonstrators’ placards outside the hotel demanded ‘Work and Peace’, ‘Homes not War’, ‘No pig iron for Japan’, ‘No Dog Collar’. Even the wharfies’ dog, Mong, had a placard. It was here that Gwen Croft, a member of the Women’s Relief Committee, first called Menzies ‘Pig Iron Bob’ a name that stuck to him even after he had ceased to be Australia’s longest-serving Prime Minister. Today it gets 1.4 million hits on Google. It was picked up by the Rev. Bill Hobbins, Bulli’s Methodist minister, prominent in the Austinmer-Corrimal Minister’s Fraternal, and popularised by Stan Moran, the well-known wharfie and communist orator in the Sydney Domain.

After Menzies finished lunch with the Mayor and other local dignitaries, he had to cross the road to the Town Hall to meet with the Labour Council committee. Concerned
about his safety, Police Inspector Roser called Roach by loud hailer to the hotel entrance and asked him to guarantee Menzies’ safe passage. Roach organised half a dozen wharfies, Communist Party members to encircle Menzies while he cleared a path through the hooting, jeering crowd. Roach recalled the incident, ‘The irony of this! Menzies, that number one Red-baiter, had to be protected by communists!’ The South Coast Times reported next day, “Mr Menzies will not readily forget his visit to Wollongong on Wednesday afternoon. It was certainly the most hostile demonstration in the history of the town”.

At the Town Hall meeting, Menzies restated the government’s position that the Dalfram should be loaded and that no part of the community would determine the country’s foreign policy. He also hinted that if the ban were lifted, the government would review its policy on the export of pig-iron and consider withdrawing the licensing system in Port Kembla. At the conclusion of the meeting, his reluctant red escort delivered him back to the hotel through the belligerent crowd.

Menzies (centre) being escorted through the crowd.

**Reaching Settlement**

The Port Kembla men were heartened by the encouragement their stand had received from Chinese people, locally and in China. They received a letter signed by no less than 34 unions in the city of Hankow, facing imminent invasion from advancing Japanese troops, saying that their support was “highly esteemed”. The guerillas fighting with Mao
Zedong hailed their support and regularly published news of the campaign in their newspapers.

Chinese seafarers were also involved in the pig-iron boycott. With the support of the Newcastle Trades Hall Council, the Chinese crew walked off the steamer Wyvern when they heard it had been bought by and would be carrying scrap to Japan. In Port Botany, Chinese crews announced they would not sail Nellore and Taiping if carrying pig-iron for Japan, and took up a collection that was sent to Port Kembla.

Chinese indentured workers (‘coolies’) had been purchased by Alexander Berry to work on his vast Shoalhaven estate when the convict system was abolished. Many settled around Nowra, becoming, like John Utick, Ah Gow and Ah Chong, highly respected business people and market gardeners. Now they rushed truckloads of fresh food north to the area relief committees, joining the provisions coming from Chinese growers and agents Sydney. The Chinese community in Sydney shouted Christmas dinner for the Dalfram crew at Taylor’s Hotel in Port Kembla and tea that night as well at a boarding house in Wollongong.

But the catastrophic jump from 180 out of work to over 4,000 demanded a comparable increase in money and food. BHP’s savage Christmas present was a blow to Illawarra workers and businesses. There could be no more donations from the sacked steel workers, mostly members of the Federated Ironworkers’ Association. And now there were more than 20,000 mouths to feed in wage-less homes over Christmas.

“We expected a frontal attack by the BHP”, said Labour Council Secretary Steve Best, “but this attack is entirely different and in another direction. The mass dismissals are being made just at the time when the shopkeepers expect to reap a good harvest.” The wharfies lost £100,000 in wages, and the local economy was feeling it. The eight local co-operative stores and small businesses were a vital force in sustaining the Dalfram boycotters’ families with donations of money, food, cut-price bread and meat, and the extension of credit. Their Christmas trade slashed by the BHP sackings, Wollongong and Port Kembla business people could no longer maintain such support let alone increase it more than ten-fold.

On January 6, after coming off duty on the picket line, Matt Roach and his son, Matt junior, were sitting outside the Trades Hall in Crown St with Larry Lawes when they were attacked by an undercover Special Branch agent and two police. They broke Lawes’ nose. Matt begged them not to hit his son who was an invalid pensioner. Thinking he was his elder brother Ted, they bashed him so badly that the lesions of his lung were torn. Four days later, the Labour Council offices were burgled. The minute book and two files marked ‘Dalfram Dispute’ containing correspondence and contact lists were all that was stolen. A Daily News reporter telegraphed the WWF that police were threatening those out of work with arrest under the Vagrancy and Consorting Acts. Four were
arrested, including Gordon King a Communist Party leader and steelworker and George Smith from the WWF. The magistrate refused to convict them.

In times of industrial strife in Illawarra, it was usual, at the request of the secretary of the Labour Council, for local banks to accept a few missed mortgage payments. The Union Bank of Australia (now part of ANZ) was involved in financial dealings with Japan, and the BHP was its biggest client. It foreclosed on the strikers. Ron Harwood, the secretary of the Picket Committee and Jack Perry, the secretary of the Relief Committee were served eviction notices.

The pressure on the crew was also now extreme. Thirteen of them deserted. Mrs. Leonard a Scots widow took in and cared for an elderly Scots crewman for many weeks. Ted McAlear, Secretary of Port Kembla WWF Branch in the 1980s, remembers being sworn to secrecy by his mum and dad when they hid another deserter. A reward of £20 was posted for Alaf Khan and Ahmed Ahmeer. On the SUA’s advice, they both gave themselves up. Sentenced to seven days jail and five days pay by a Wollongong magistrate for “absenting themselves from the Dalfram without permission”, their sentence was set aside. Re-arrested as Illegal Immigrants, they were sentenced to six months.

On January 11, Roach, McHenry and Healey were part of a deputation to Menzies. On returning to Wollongong, Roach recommended to the branch that provided that no further pig iron be sent from the port and the sacked steel workers be reinstated immediately, the terms for settlement of the dispute should be accepted. Only 32 of the 162 members present supported him. Menzies was enraged. He told the workers they had 24 hours to change their position, or licensed workers would be engaged not only for the Dalfram but for every vessel in the port.

The Labour Council committee recommended a return to work and officially banned any handling in Illawarra of all future exports of war materials. With relief funds almost gone, expressing their “deep appreciation for the co-operation and solidarity displayed by unions and the general public”, the South Coast branch of the WWF reluctantly agreed to the Labour Council’s request on 21 January. Under the terms of settlement, the Dalfram was to be loaded, the licences under the Transport Workers Act were withdrawn from Port Kembla, and union representatives were to meet with the Prime Minister and Attorney-General to discuss the question of an embargo on future exports of pig-iron.

On 24 January, Jim Healy received an unofficial Government assurance that no more pig-iron would be shipped to Japan. Subsequently, probably only 70,000 tons of scrap metal and pig-iron were sent. The next day, the wharfies angrily loaded the pig-iron ‘under protest’ as the Sydney Branch had done. The dog collar licences were withdrawn from the port.
But the picket line stayed in place. No one could be found to sail the ship out of the harbour. Writing his account of the dispute in the *Bulletin*, First Officer Harold Charlton explained,

> We hoodwinked the wharfies. Secretly our agent set to work in Sydney rounding up men. He rounded up drunks and stiffs from the waterfront and kept them drinking. The men were hauled on board but were too drunk to stoke the boilers and the officers raised steam. When the men came to, they did not want to work the ship, but when it was declared ‘no work, no beer and ‘baccy, they turned to.

Coming passed the Great Barrier Reef, the captain received a radio message:

> URGENT Have reason to suspect time bomb placed on your ship at Kembla. Advise return to harbour.

The captain ordered the ship searched and the life boats made ready, but, according to Charlton “there were anxious days ahead with nerves on edge at the thought of explosions”.

In 1939 Sir Isaac Isaacs, the first Australian-born Governor-General, expressed his “unbounded admiration” for the waterside workers and wrote that “Kembla with the sturdy but peaceful and altogether disinterested attitude of the men concerned, will find a place in our history beside the Eureka Stockade as a noble stand against executive dictatorship and against an attack on Australian democracy”.

For Ted Roach, the victory was of enormous national and international importance.

> We met the reactionary government and the monopolies head on. In the process, we struck heavy blows for democracy and destroyed a strike-breaking, union-destroying system of licensing. We concluded the battle with no physical casualties and emerged a much stronger organisation.

Winning the dispute meant that when Port Kembla wharfies transferred to other ports, they agitated confidently and successfully against the bull system and for a union roster in their new ports. According to Roach himself,

> I could give you a dozen examples. They took the message out. All the building of the rosters that was the most important thing in strengthening the Federation. The implementation of rosters everywhere took out of the bosses’ hand the ability to victimise and coerce members. It gave them a new lease of life as independents, and strength developed in that independence. The boss couldn’t sack them, and the union grew with this.
In October 1942 Ted Roach wrote in the WWF journal,

in November 1938 we refused to load pig-iron because we correctly pointed out it was being used to prepare the Japanese Military Fascists for their policy of expansion in the Pacific and ultimate attack on Australia. Rabaul, Moresby, Wyndham, Broome, Darwin and now Sydney have shown the reactionary policy of Menzies and Co. in bold relief to the policy of our branch. We ask Menzies again was our action ‘a provocative act against a friendly power’? We ask the Australian people to judge.
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