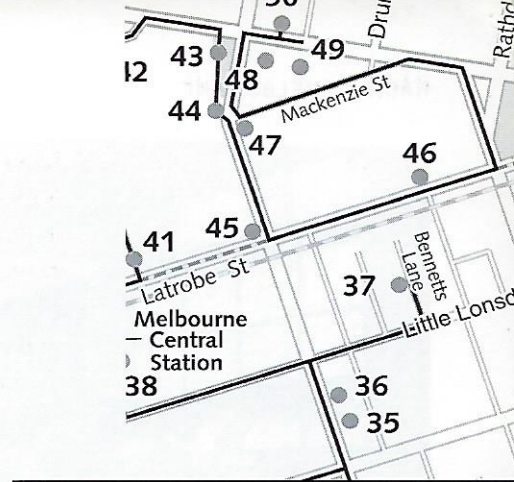


37. Salvation Army Picket

21 Bennetts Lane



Bennetts Lane today is primarily known for its jazz venue, which attracts a well-heeled and glamorous crowd to a small nightclub.

In the 1930s, though, there was precious little glamour to be found in the street. What the Bennetts Lane address meant to many at that time was a free meal at the Salvation Army. Here, on a daily basis, hundreds of men would queue up outside the grim-looking factory building at number 21 for a plate of mutton dished up by the charity-run soup kitchen inside.

By 1930, the jobless rate in Melbourne stood at around 25 per cent. Yet there was no national benefit scheme for the unemployed. A Royal Commission a few years earlier had briefly contemplated introducing a national unemployment insurance scheme to give the jobless a regular income – but had then ruled it unnecessary.

Instead, relief provision remained the responsibility of state governments which, for the most part, set up public works schemes to soak up a small part of the unemployed and left charity to cope with the rest. The result was a chaotic system of relief – hard to negotiate, and only ever available to a tiny proportion of those in need. For the most part, only married men received sustenance payments; single men and women had to apply to separate shelters for beds and meals.

Charity organisations (such as the Ladies Benevolent Fund) were generally operated by middle class women, the wives of businessmen, pastoralists and members of Parliament. They *did* run shelters and soup kitchens, and provide clothing, bedding and fuel, and occasionally some money towards rent. They also, however, subjected the unemployed to searching examinations, probing their cleanliness, their reputation with shopkeepers, their morals and even their sexual habits – and were not averse to maintaining blacklists of political agitators or the ‘undeserving’.

And so, charity organisations were not universally regarded as favourably as one might have expected. By 1930, the Melbourne Trades Hall Council and the newly formed Central Unemployed Committee had organised a demonstration which demanded that sustenance provision be taken away from the Ladies



Above: The warehouse today looks just as it did during the Depression (top) but perhaps not for much longer. The surrounding area is rapidly being developed for apartment blocks.

employed men conducted a meeting in the courtyard at Trades Hall. Bennetts Lane was discussed, and the men resolved to declare the kitchen 'black'. In effect, this meant a boycott. But it was not a peaceful resolve to seek food elsewhere that they had in mind. Rather, they agreed to set up a picket line outside the kitchen, disallowing any entry to the place until the food was improved. At the same time, the action would publicise the problems with charity-run relief and put pressure on the government to issue meal tickets for single men.

That Monday, a hundred men or so met in the lane at an early hour. A picket line was swiftly in place, and speeches were made on the need to fight for better treatment rather than meekly accepting whatever was dished out.

The Argus saw things in a somewhat different light:

Benevolent Society, and distributed instead by the government or by councils. Some fifteen hundred men marched from the Exhibition Building to the Premier's Office, calling for the soup kitchens to be replaced with meal tickets, and free charity shelters with vouchers to registered lodging houses.

But the first direct action by the Melbourne unemployed took place in Bennetts Lane.

As the third largest charity in Melbourne, the Salvation Army operated five shelters in 1930, as well as the Bennetts Lane soup kitchen. The organisation was not regarded with much sympathy by radicals, who objected both to its insistence on religious surrender and to the licence given to the Salvos to march and sing in the streets in a time when working class processions were universally harassed.

The kitchen at Bennetts Lane, moreover, enjoyed a particularly poor reputation. The premises were overcrowded and unhygienic, the food often inedible, and the bowls rusty. Most of all, the men complained about the lack of variety. The unemployed queued, sometimes for hours, to receive a plate of boiled mutton or, on occasion, a saveloy.

On 26 July, three hundred unem-



NO POT-LUCK FOR HIM!

"There has been a strike on the relief work at Maroubra (Sydney)... The Salvation Army's meals for the hungry in Melbourne have been declared black, the leaders complaining of the lack of variety in the food."

THE OLD LADY: "I'm tidying up the place; but if you like to step inside and take pot-luck, you're welcome to something to eat!"

THE DEADBEAT: "No pot-luck for me, Missus! When you're ready with three courses and a toothpick you can ring the blinking bell."

A *Bulletin* cartoon expresses the conservative response to unemployment.

at lunch time the disgruntled ones most of whom had lunches in paper bags gathered around the kitchen to prevent their less fortunate comrades in getting something to eat.

The day ended with police moving in on the picketers, arresting two men (and charging one of them with 'having insufficient means of support' – an unsurprising state of affairs for someone outside a soup kitchen!).

Over the next few days the picket grew in strength (from a hundred and fifty men to over four hundred), while the numbers eating at the kitchen dropped from almost a thousand to around two hundred. On the Tuesday, four hundred men marched through the city carrying banners, one of which read, succinctly enough: 'To Hell With the Soup Kitchen!'

Needless to say, reactions to the protest tended to vary depending upon the spectators' own experiences of unemployment. One gentleman, witnessing the demonstration, wrote to *The Argus*:

What depths of moral degeneration are we as a nation sinking to when our men who are unfortunate enough to be in dire need of free meals provided at soup kitchens can turn round and complain lack of variety of the food and of the 'monotonous' mutton? . . . For the common good, I sincerely hope that steps will be taken (if not already) to prevent further such flagrant banner displays and the public parading of such sinister sentiments as expressed in that degrading language – 'To Hell With the Soup Kitchen!'

Despite such condemnation, the action ultimately proved successful. By the end of the week – with the picket still in place – Lieutenant Colonel John Blake, the Social Secretary for the Salvation Army, met with the Premier, who promised that the government would provide funds for the purchase of beef as well as mutton, and would help the Salvation Army find a larger premises for the kitchen. Despite this, Blake still managed to convey his personal contempt for the unemployed when he commented to *The Herald*: 'We have been putting mutton on every day until some of the men started going around bleating like sheep. We are now going to try some beef for a change.'

The main demand – the provision of food vouchers – was not won until later. But the black ban helped to shake the passivity of the unemployed and to kick-start the protest movement. Through the remaining years of the Depression, the jobless became increasingly militant. The organisations they formed demonstrated that, even in the most difficult circumstances, it's always better to fight than to surrender.