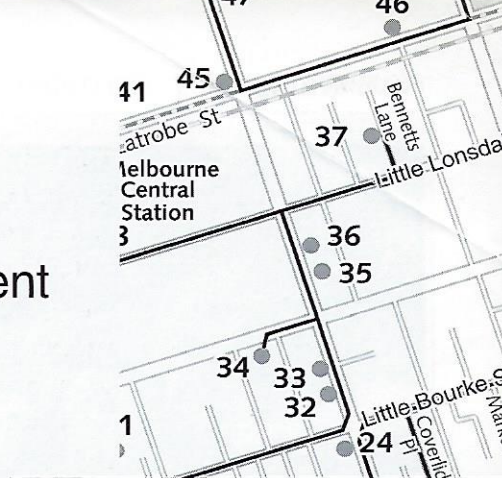


## 35. Unemployed Workers Movement

260 Russell Street



The first eviction I saw gave me in many ways one of the biggest shocks of my life. It had a devastating effect on me, and I think probably it and a few other experiences were what finished the capitalist system as far as I was concerned, and I've never seen fit to change my view . . .

That's how Noel Counihan recalled the sight of a working class family forced onto the street during the Depression. And he, like many others, felt so angered that he joined the Unemployed Workers Movement – the organisation that had its headquarters in the three-storey building now known as Cafe Baloo.

The Melbourne branch of the UWM grew out of a committee of unemployed men who met in the courtyard at Trades Hall. Their first demonstration culminated in a brawl with police – and the battle to organise the jobless had begun.

The government introduced a form of dole (albeit in the form of orders from shops for specific foods) in mid 1930. To qualify you had to be a married man and had to register at the Labour Exchange, in the old Customs House on the corner of Flinders and William Streets. On the first day it opened, fifteen thousand men queued, entirely overwhelming the two clerks provided to process them. UWM members quickly took advantage of the situation, organising six separate impromptu meetings in the courtyard and on Bourke Street.

The tactic of utilising the lengthy queues in which the unemployed spent so much time (in soup kitchens and shelters) as forums for politics proved highly successful. By late 1930, seven UWM branches operated in working class suburbs like Fitzroy, Richmond and Brunswick. Many of the leading members of the organisation were Communist Party members, and it was common for branches to run classes in Marxism for both men and women. The organisation operated youth sections, and ran inter-branch sporting competitions. In the volatile and often violent political climate of the 1930s, it also provided a self-defence unit for working class organisations. Although the leaders and most of the members were male, the UWM featured women's sections and usually tried to have a female speaker on its platforms.

The struggle against evictions was probably the UWM's major activity. The





Noel Counihan's *At the Start of the March, 1932*, captures both the misery of unemployment and the anger it generated. Opposite top: a rare photo of an eviction of an entire street in Fitzroy. Below: Cafe Baloo.

organisation's tactics were simple. Activists would surround a house and physically prevent the police removing the tenants. Sometimes hundreds, and occasionally thousands, would turn up to these actions. One such memorable eviction fight took place in Brunswick:

To the unemployed men the mention of the word bailiff was like waving a red rag at a bull. Without further parley the entire squad was on its way to Gold Street at the double.

In her kitchen Mrs Curruthers had just heard the agent instruct the bailiff to mark certain furniture. At that moment there was a commotion and through the doors and windows appeared the modern knight errants. A push sent the bailiff reeling back into a chair where an enterprising gentleman tipped a dish of water over him. The

agent and the bailiff were then subjected to some rough handling as they were bundled unceremoniously down the passage and thrown out of the house where they were seized upon by the crowd numbering several hundred who were waiting in the roadway. The agent and his clerk managed to escape in a motor car whilst the bailiff who was again roughly handled made a break for the South Brunswick railway station nearby. His progress was expedited by the avengers and he was almost thrown over a post and rail fence before he got out of the danger zone.

With little money and few resources at their disposal, the unemployed publicised eviction attempts however they could. One member recalls that 'the only method of advertising we had was a lump of chalk and we'd walk Melbourne of a night time chalking the footpaths from one end to the other'. Newspaper reports of the day record arrests for such crimes as chalking messages on footpaths such as 'Eviction case on the corner of Reilly and Forest Streets. Women and 8 children. Roll up'.

As the Depression wore on – and evictions became more common – a bicycle rider clanging a tin can usually proved enough of a signal to rally a street against a bailiff.



The anti-eviction actions weren't always successful. One of the UWM members joked later: 'There were so many [activists] in Pentridge that they were holding study classes on political economy out there, and the Internationale was being whistled in the yards'.

But when the UWM couldn't save the tenants, it sometimes proved able to punish the real estate agents. In one case in Burnley:

The evictions were instigated by the estate agents on behalf of the owner. They never let you know who owned the houses and we didn't know how to find out for ourselves, so we decided to take on the Richmond estate agents. On the Friday we met at a certain place and divided up into groups of two people to each estate agent. It was late shopping night and at a quarter to nine there were two of us outside each of the nine estate agents in Richmond. One chap in each group had a watch, and they were all synchronised. At a quarter to nine, 'Bang!' We wrecked every estate agent's window in Richmond with lumps of blue metal.

Two weeks after this action, Parliament granted rent allowance to the unemployed.

The UWM reached its peak towards the end of 1931, with some twenty-six branches (in both the city and the country) and an estimated Victorian membership of seven thousand. The building in Russell Street was known as the Proletarian Club, and provided a meeting place and central headquarters.

When the Depression ended, the UWM gradually became less and less relevant, and eventually disbanded. Many of its members, though, had become political activists for life. Today, Cafe Baloo stands as a reminder of the way the Depression destroyed lives – and also permanently changed the way many people looked at the world.



Bedding and other belongings of 75 Unemployed Men evicted from dwellings at corner of Fitzroy and James Sts., Fitzroy. Scene in James-st. shortly after eviction.

