



## 5. Eating the rich

### The Melbourne Club, 36 Collins Street

On 12 October 1982, seventeen guests sat down to dine at the Melbourne Club. They stood out from the other patrons: scruffier, younger and somewhat furtive as they passed the doorman. Even stranger, they'd brought their own lunch, carefully wrapped in brown paper bags.

The 'lunch-in' had been organised by Work for Today, a group of unemployed activists, as a method of publicising the spiralling jobless rate. Their leaflet asserted:

The Melbourne Club at the top of Collins Street in the city is the best-known and most obnoxious retreat of the spoilt rich. While Victorian Liberal leaders Lindsay Thompson and Digby Crozier, along with Press barons Sir Vincent Fairfax and James Fairfax, can gorge themselves on two-hour business lunches served on expensive silver, many unemployed and pensioners are worrying where their next meal is coming from.

The invasion stirred several clubmen from their post-luncheon torpor to comment to the media. The retired company director and practising solicitor Thomas Graham explained that he personally felt 'great sympathy for the unemployed'. Nonetheless, he judged the protest 'misconstrued':

In the minds of a lot of people the club is somewhere where people talk with malice aforethought and try to take the poor people down. You know, if anyone tries to talk business here, he is soon told to shut up.

But the knowledge that Melbourne's elite tried to take the poor people down only during office hours did not placate the demonstrators. Nor did the explanation of club director Ronald Titcombe that in actuality members enjoyed few privileges:

I know of five members, off the top of my head, who are retired and are pensioners, and whose fees have been cut back so that they may stay members of the club.

The constabulary arrived soon after to remove the intruders from Titcombe's hospice for retirees, welfare dependants and other indigents. Which was just as well, for, as he confided to the magistrate during the subsequent trespass case, they represented 'a threat to the valuable silver on display in the dining room and a table setting'.

Today, static pools of joblessness feature as an accepted part of the political landscape. But the onset of high unemployment after the affluent seventies provoked widespread fear and anger – and a vigorous campaign for the right to work. The largest and most significant unemployed activist grouping formed in 1979, under the name of the Victorian Coalition Against Poverty and Unemployment.

A month after the first incident at the Melbourne Club, CAPU scheduled a major demonstration, with the endorsement of twenty-eight trade unions, the Victorian Council of Social Service and other welfare groups. Even the state Labor government came on board, with 2000 public transport vouchers to allow the unemployed to travel to the protest.

Yet the campaign maintained a radical edge. A few days before the main rally, Work for Today struck again. This time, they scattered leaflets from the gallery of Parliament House. A spokeswoman explained that actions would be called ‘any place where there are people who make decisions, who have wealth that ought to be shared’.

The CAPU rally on 12 November began at Trades Hall and then moved to the City Square. The Tramways Union supplemented the government vouchers with free passage for protesters, while workers from some of the building unions stopped work, alongside unionists from the Williamstown naval dockyards. The Amalgamated Metal Workers and Shipwrights Union, Australian Railways Union, Vehicle Builders Employees Federation, and Printing and Kindred Industries Union all provided contingents carrying union banners. At the City Square, someone displayed the old Depression slogan ‘Work or Riot’, while veteran unionist Clarrie O’Shea joined CAPU activist Harry van Moorst to explain, ‘We have to get out and make revolution to overthrow this rotten system’.

The march got as far as the intersection of Swanston and Flinders streets before demonstrators sat down to block traffic and to ‘Stop the City’. One protester, according to the *Age*, brandished a red flag at a police superintendent and invited him to kiss it. The superintendent declined.

After the sit-in, the rally progressed to the Stock Exchange, where the red flag made another appearance, this time joining the Eureka emblem on poles that had previously



A disorderly trio. Mick Armstrong is a socialist activist, Paddy Garrity works at Trades Hall Arts and Marcus Banks (pictured with daughter Katie) is writing a PhD on the government's welfare reform agenda.

sported Stock Exchange pennants. Police had the exchange well secured, and the crowd eventually returned to the City Square where the rally was scheduled to end.

Instead, socialist agitators proposed a march to the Melbourne Club. The destination struck a chord, and the demonstration set off, with the chant:

What do we want? The right to work! When do we want it? Now! How are we going to get it? Occupy, organise, fight for the right to work.

The crowd, estimated by organisers at 3000 and by police at 500, moved at a brisk pace before breaking into a run at the upper end of Collins Street. Mick Armstrong from the International Socialists was at the front:

By the time we got to the Melbourne Club, the back of the crowd was miles behind. Really, we hadn't gone with any intention of getting in. The idea was that we'd just charge up and bang on the door but when we got there, there was only a small number of cops on the steps. They were totally taken by surprise.

Paddy Garritty, then working as a painter and docker, had a plan of his own:

I tried the first window, the second window, the third window – when I got to the fourth window, I hopped in. By this time, all the crowd's congregating outside. So the table's been set, with this lovely setting. So I pick up the champagne glass and start giving revolutionary salutes to the crowd and toasting them, and they go berserk.

Outside, Marcus Banks, another IS member, turned his attention to the main door:

We couldn't get through at first, the police were squashed between us and the door. But I thought we could get some momentum up so I got a sway happening by asking people to step back and there was a chant we used to push on the doors. So the whole front was pushing.

It took a minute for the doors to go, because they were massive with thick bolts and heavily locked, but eventually they just snapped.

Inside, two private parties were underway: one for Professor Graeme Schofield, Dean of Medicine at Monash University, and the other for Sir Gustav Nossal, director of the Walter and Eliza Hall Institute of Medical Science. Guests expecting a sedate soiree looked on in horror as police threw about half the demonstrators bodily into the crowd, and then sealed the rest inside.

Eventually, the club members were moved (or 'scurried like frightened rats', as the IS newspaper would have it) to the rear garden. Here, they consoled themselves with drinks and canapés while the demonstration raged around them with what the house manager later described as 'the roar of a Grand Final crowd'. Nor did the ambience improve when officers bodily dragged Paddy Garritty through the function:

There they are carrying me out by my arms and legs past all these people with wine glasses staring at this dirty little disreputable fucking man and I tell them,

‘Eat up and enjoy yourself. There’s forty thousand starving people out there want to come in and help you enjoy the feed! So if the doors collapse, I’d duck under the table if I were you!’

The demonstrators outside realised that the police had sealed the entrance. They showed their hostility with a chant of ‘Let them go! Let them go!’ and a barrage of rocks, drink cans and other missiles. The *Sun* saw:

ugly scenes when two men in business suits appeared at one of the first floor windows of the club. The chants were matched by people hammering on the parked cars, clanging pipes, beating drums, clapping and playing various instruments.

Mick Armstrong had been ejected when the police reinforcements arrived:

The crowd was really pumped up and just didn’t want to go. So there was a long drawn out battle. At one stage, I went off and bought a plastic bucket of soft drink cans for people to drink and when I was walking back people were just grabbing them and throwing them at the club.

More police arrived, along with a fire truck, and the action outside settled into a stalemate. After more than an hour, the police decided it might be prudent to release twelve of the fifteen activists still trapped inside. They ‘marched down the club steps with their hands above their heads in triumphal salutes to the cheers of the crowd like heroes’.

The crowd marched down to Russell Street police headquarters to await the release of the remaining three. The demonstration finally dispersed at about 10 o’clock.

Four protesters – including Banks and Garritty, who had managed to clamber back inside the club again – faced charges of unlawful entry, criminal damage and riot. The ‘Support the Melbourne Club Four’ campaign decided to fight the case on a political basis. Central to the strategy was highlighting for the jury the affluence of the club,



Top: The crowd gathers prior to the march.

Above: The red flag flies from the Melbourne Club.

while bringing out the lighter side of the demonstration itself. Marcus Banks recalls:

To establish riot you have to cause fear in a person of reasonable courage and character and the cop in charge was positioning himself as that kind of person. He said that he was fearful because he saw a banner saying 'Eat the rich!'

And our lawyer Len Hartnett – who was very much a showman – just stared at him in silence and then looked at the jury with his mouth open.

He then addressed the sergeant while still looking at the jury and said, 'Do you mean that you thought that the demonstration was going to eat people?'

And the jury were on the floor in laughter.

The jury eventually found all four not guilty.

A series of responses to the demonstration unfolded in its immediate aftermath. Some within the movement thought the action alienated support, and made it more difficult to build effective anti-unemployment demonstrations.

But others remained upbeat. Asked what she believed her actions had shown, one protester said, 'We want to let them know that we are very angry. That is the ruling class in there, that's the tax evaders.' Another agreed: 'We hope this will give the movement against poverty and unemployment a lot more momentum. We're showing that we're not going to be nice any more.'

Certainly, the riot generated an urgency around unemployment, with the federal Labor Party a few days later committing to an emergency plan to combat joblessness through industry protection and a job creation scheme.

For his part, Opposition Leader Jeff Kennett tried to pin the incident on the government, claiming that the demonstration was the work of 'professional activists who had been involved in the demonstrations and violence at Newport': 'The Cain government actively supported, paid for and encouraged people to demonstrate against the interests and property of Victorians.'

Perhaps unconvinced by the image of such a scrupulously moderate government masterminding unemployment riots, the *Herald* sought further elucidation from Right-wing sociologist Bob Birrell, who duly warned of scientific evidence that 'when people organise themselves into a group for demonstrations their inhibitions diminish, creating the potential for abnormal behaviour'. Nonetheless, readers could take courage from Birrell's professional reassurance that the incident probably didn't signify the onset of street violence as a daily part of Australian life.

The Melbourne Club made its own assessment. It redoubled the strength of its doors and replaced its windows with reinforced glass.