

THE RAVENSWOOD STRIKE

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The declining years of a gold-mining town are fraught with the tensions and bitterness of unfulfilled hopes. As the supply of gold diminishes, surviving mining companies desperately seek more capital to maintain operations; some take the gamble of new and risky ventures, others try to cut costs by updating machinery and streamlining production overheads. A gradual population exodus occurs, leaving those who stay to savour the memory of elusive wealth. Local folklore offers varied reasons for the collapse of the field. As Geoffrey Blainey acknowledges, this is rarely attributed simply to the exhaustion of payable ore: "If only the company had bought new pumps, if they'd extended that drive at the 1600 foot level another seventy feet, if they'd sacked that mean manager."¹

In the "merry-go-round of blame"² attached to the demise of the North Queensland town of Ravenswood, one event stands out: an industrial dispute affecting principally the New Ravenswood company from November 1912 to July 1913. The villain of the piece, however, differs according to prejudice: on the one hand, Archibald Lawrence Wilson, general manager of New Ravenswood Limited, who at the height of the dispute allegedly declared, "I made this town and I'll bugger it before I'll give in to the strikers!";³ on the other hand, the workers themselves, led astray by "irresponsible outside agitators" from a "purely Socialistic" trade union.⁴ Of course, apportioning blame in any industrial dispute is an exercise of dubious merit, more so when historical records are incomplete. Notwithstanding, a study of the Ravenswood strike does reveal some of the economic and social pressures affecting a small, isolated gold-mining field in its twilight years.

Visitors to Ravenswood in 1912 would have observed scant evidence of community decline. Indeed, a more likely impression was one of solid prosperity. After the formation of the New Ravenswood company in 1898, the town had flourished. New timber, masonry and red brick

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buildings - hotels, shops, residences and public utilities - all lent an aura of permanence to Ravenswood. A.L. Wilson's own house, an imposing structure overlooking the central town area, symbolised his position as shire council chairman, patron of societies and sporting clubs, and "uncrowned King of Ravenswood".⁵ This superficial opulence, however, masked the underlying insecurity of Ravenswood's wealth, as Roderick records:

The population reached 4,707 in 1903, but its decline soon after mirrored the fortunes of the field. Many mines were returning lower yields to the ton; some were forced to close to avert financial losses. By 1911, Ravenswood's future was bleak: the population had decreased to 3,300; ore treatment was still high at 36,000 tons, but the yield was the lowest since 1897; and the New Ravenswood Limited recorded its smallest returns and dividend (6½ percent) since its inception.⁶

That New Ravenswood was still profitable was due to the efficient management of the company. By constantly updating machinery and extraction methods, Wilson had reduced mining and milling costs by 12½ percent in three years. As a result the gold yield increased and a dividend of 18¾ percent was paid in June 1912.⁷ Earlier that year, however, the first portent of impending industrial conflict also appeared in Ravenswood: in February, following the visit of a union organiser, most workers joined the Amalgamated Workers' Association.⁸

Unlike their counterparts in the coal and base metal industries, gold miners were not among the most militant of Australian unionists. Even while working for wages many retained hopes of sudden riches; they frequently supplemented paid employment by prospecting and working small claims. It was usually during recession, with easily-won gold exhausted, mining activity dominated by one or two large companies, and employment opportunities diminishing, that trade unions were successfully established. This was certainly the case in Ravenswood and, to a lesser extent, in the neighbouring reefing district of Charters Towers: previous attempts at industrial organisation had resulted in small, ephemeral unions devoted more to political campaigning than to improving working conditions.⁹ By 1912, however,

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Wilson's concern with cutting costs in the interests of economical mining had clearly placed him at loggerheads with his own employees, who made unfavourable comparisons between their own conditions and those enjoyed by other North Queensland workers. In these circumstances, the AWA's enlistment of Ravenswood mine workers was hardly surprising.

Since its formation in the mining districts of Chillagoe and Herberton in 1907, the AWA had earned a reputation for industrial assertiveness, energetic organisation and commitment to Labor politics. In 1911 it won the admiration of unionists throughout Australia by conducting a lengthy but successful strike leading to better conditions in the sugar industry. Enrolling miners, railway navvies, sugar workers and labourers generally, the northern union fostered an amalgamation movement culminating in a merger with the Australian Workers' Union in January 1913. In joining the AWA, Ravenswood employees thus became members of the most dynamic labour organisation in Queensland.¹⁰ Wilson recognised the potential threat posed to New Ravenswood by the AWA's entry to the field. Commenting on the general political and industrial situation in Queensland in March 1912 he apprehensively - though prematurely - forecast a local strike for "shorter hours of work and higher wages".¹¹

In mid-May 1912 two rock drillers from the Sunset mine approached Wilson on behalf of all machine men engaged by New Ravenswood Limited, and requested a rise in wages from 10s. 10d. to 11s. 8d per day, amounting to 5s. per week. The men had strong grounds for such a claim: at Charters Towers the rate of 11s. 8d. had been paid for many years. Wilson agreed to grant the increase, but terminated a customary bonus paid to men sinking shafts or winzes. Informing his London directors of the compromise, he confided that "in reality I am conceding nothing, but in a manner of speaking, I have saved the company a large sum owing to the fact that the men have not received the higher [Charters Towers] rate of wages since we started operations. Had we been paying this higher rate of wages since the inception of the company,

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it would have run into several thousands of pounds."¹²

Subsequently Wilson continued his economies by installing labour-saving machinery in the mines and improving the efficiency of milling operations. In August he proudly recorded the visit of a Charters Towers mine manager, who was impressed with the New Ravenswood methods: "...although our reefs are much smaller and erratic, and we have a lesser number of men at work than he had, we extracted a larger tonnage than was the case at Charters Towers".¹³ When the power house drivers asked for an assistant for each shift in October, Wilson's response was characteristic: calculating that this demand would cost £636 per annum, "with no material advantage excepting that the work would be made easier", he chose instead to purchase a modern air compressor to drive the piston drills "with a minimum consumption of steam". This would provide capacity for extra drills, effect a considerable saving in fuel, and make the work of the power house drivers much easier - "and so (I hope) avoid the trouble now impending and save the employment of extra assistants".¹⁴ Such measures, however, coincided with a decline in company profitability towards the end of 1912. On 11 November, noting that the Sunset mine was running at a loss, Wilson discharged 26 men (6 machine men, 16 miners and 4 truckers) from the Sunset, 2 miners and 2 carpenters from the London North mine, and 3 truckers from the General Grant mine - reducing the New Ravenswood workforce by some 15 percent.¹⁵

The workers' response to the retrenchments was prompt, if somewhat confused in its objectives. The following morning a deputation of local unionists presented Wilson with a demand for an increase in wages for truckers from 8s. to 9s. per day, a move apparently planned for some time (together with a demand for reduced hours) but now stimulated by the dismissals. The mid-day train to Ravenswood brought the northern district secretary of the AWA, Jack Dash, hastily summoned from Townsville by the local workers. Leading another deputation to Wilson, Dash claimed that the dismissed employees were prominent AWA members, and charged the general manager with victimisation. This

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assertion was countered with a frosty reply: "I informed them that I had shortened hands in consequence of the poverty of the Sunset Mine and that I had no means of knowing who were and who were not members of this Union".¹⁶

The next day, Wednesday 13 November, Wilson again met with Dash and the president of the Ravenswood branch of the AWA with similar results. Accusations of victimisation were made and denied, and Wilson refused to give an undertaking to re-instate the retrenched workers as more labour was required: "I pointed out that I was not likely to require any more men for some considerable time and that the engaging and discharging of miners was left entirely in the hands of the mine managers - and that I was not going to bind myself with a promise I might find difficult to fulfill". He did, however, offer to pay the truckers 8s. 4d. per day, the ruling rate at Charters Towers. Four days later a meeting of AWA members rejected this offer, widening the terms of the dispute by demanding a 9s. per day minimum for all workers and a reduction in hours from 45½ to 44 per week. On 19 November Wilson refused these demands, telling yet another deputation "some home truths which they did not relish". Within twenty-four hours a strike was declared and union picket lines set up around all New Ravenswood shafts and works.¹⁷

In the following week the dispute was extended to other Ravenswood companies, involving workers employed by the tributors of the Grant and Sunset Extended and its treatment works, the Deep Mines mill. Yet not all workers downed tools: of the near 200-strong New Ravenswood workforce, approximately 70 non unionists remained at work. A further blow to the AWA's hopes of a general walk-out came when fourteen of New Ravenswood's eighteen engine drivers - all members of the Federated Engine Drivers' and Firemen's Association (FEDFA) - refused to strike, defying an express instruction from their union executive to support the AWA.¹⁸ Subsequently, new rifts in the workforce emerged, creating a bitter division in the Ravenswood community during the ensuing months.

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In the meantime, there seemed little prospect of an early settlement of the dispute, especially when on 27 November Wilson refused any more meetings with the union: "I have already received five deputations from the AWA...and I do not feel disposed to meet any more....I have already conceded the truckers 8/4 per day and do not intend to concede any further".¹⁹

Wilson was clearly perplexed by the strike - the first serious dispute in the company's history and perhaps the only strike ever at Ravenswood.²⁰ He appears to have genuinely believed that his employees were satisfied with their conditions and that the strikers were misrepresented by "extremists" and "paid agitators". No doubt he was encouraged in this belief by the less than universal support for direct action among the workers. Consequently, Wilson could only attribute the cause of the dispute to the notion that the AWA, "a *political* as well as an industrial union", was bent on disruption.²¹

It is unlikely, however, that the strike was particularly welcomed by the AWA district and executive officials. The 1911 sugar trouble, the Brisbane general strike in January-February 1912, state elections in April 1912, and planning for amalgamation with the AWU, had already strained the energies and resources of the union. In the northern district, the AWA's main industrial objective in 1912-13 was securing better conditions for its several thousand members in the Cloncurry copper mining district. Nevertheless, once the Ravenswood dispute began, union officials judged it expedient to endorse the claim for higher wages and a 44 hour week, which was, after all, union policy and long-standing practice in North Queensland mines. It is possible that the promise of improved wages and conditions was instrumental in gaining Ravenswood members for the union early in 1912. Success in the strike would enhance the prestige of the AWA and secure the loyalty not merely of its local members but also of workers throughout the state - especially those in the north-western copper mines. Hence Wilson - "a stubborn foe of unionism"²² - must be forced to give in regardless of his company's capacity to concede the demands. Indeed,

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it is probable that neither the AWA nor the Ravenswood miners even understood New Ravenswood's latest financial difficulties. Rather, as Roderick affirms, "the mining workforce saw the current 18³/₄ per cent dividend, the increased value of the yield, and nearly £35,000 in general reserves, as strong grounds for wage claims".²³

During December 1912 non-union "loyalists" continued with small-scale development work in the mines and the annual overhaul of boilers and machinery. Christmas saw the arrival of several Ravenswood men from the Cloncurry district, enlivening the town's festive period and intensifying feelings between strikers and "scabs". Epitomizing community divisions, brawls, slanging matches and stone-throwing were commonplace, culminating shortly before midnight on New Year's Eve with a revolver shot in the main street, wounding a 20 year old Cloncurry miner, Michael Gorman, in the leg.²⁴ By mid-January, however, Ravenswood was "very quiet": heavy rain had further curtailed mining operations, most of the strikers had gone west looking for work, and the nearby Donnybrook and Erin's Hope United mines had closed down.²⁵

With the New Ravenswood company now operating at a loss, its directors in London became increasingly concerned about the strike. Early in January 1913 they refused Wilson's request to transfer £25,000 from the reserves to the company's working capital;²⁶ a few weeks' later they suggested that operations be shut down at least temporarily. Wilson rejected this as "very unwise":

In the first place, the men who have remained loyal and borne with all the contumely and intimidation from the strikers would have to be discharged, which would simply be playing into the hands of the AWA in as much as nothing would be more natural than for those men to be gathered into the ranks of the AWA. There would then be no question as to them being masters of the situation and the company their slaves. It is of the utmost importance that our loyalists should be kept on, and in the meantime I am hopeful of procuring a few more men....

By working as at present, although a loss may arise in the month during which there is no crushing there is a profit to be made when the crushing takes place, and this would recoup the previous losses either wholly or partially, or at any rate be less of a loss than shutting down entirely.²⁷

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Wilson struggled to keep New Ravenswood going. Early in February he travelled to Brisbane for interviews with the Minister for Mines and Judge Macnaughton of the Industrial Court ("a personal friend of mine of many years' standing") with a view to settling the dispute under the recently-gazetted *Industrial Peace Act*. This legislation, passed by the Denham Liberal government in response to the Brisbane general strike, provided heavy penalties for strikes. In the capital, however, Wilson learnt that the necessary court machinery would not be ready until late April. He had more success - "with some difficulty and expense" - in recruiting non-union labour, engaging 16 miners in Brisbane and Gympie. By the end of February New Ravenswood had 95 men on the pay sheet, and had commenced crushing small amounts of ore. "I am striving day and night to break the strike", Wilson reported; "...it is only the fear and terror of the agitators that is now keeping some of the men still out on strike".²⁸

The stalemate nevertheless continued. On 7 April 1913 work resumed at the Grant and Sunset Extended following voluntary local arbitration which granted the men a 44 hour week but no wage increase. Wilson deplored this decision as breaking the unity of the employers, but shortly afterwards also conceded the reduced hours to his loyalists, expressing the hope that this might induce a general settlement of the dispute.²⁹ Yet the union (now part of the AWU) remained firm on the wages issue: no more men returned to work and the strike at the New Ravenswood Limited dragged on through May and June.

The pressures now began to tell on Wilson. His relations with the company staff, already strained by his obsession with costs, deteriorated. At the end of May Wilson's eldest son, who had been employed in December 1912 as surveyor and assistant metallurgist, was suspended by order of the board of directors in suspicious but mysterious circumstances.³⁰ In June the company secretary, J. Snelham, and the metallurgist, W.A. Caldwell resigned their positions, leading the directors to urge the general manager to "throw aside all petty

quarrels and jealousies and to work harmoniously and energetically with the other officers of the Company with a view to extricating the Company from its present position".³¹

The feeling engendered within the Ravenswood community by the strike exacerbated Wilson's worries. It was difficult for a man who had for so long enjoyed almost universal respect and popularity not to be troubled by the seething bitterness which set apart neighbours and friends, and even divided families. While some workers were drawing regular wages, their former colleagues were getting by on meagre incomes in the form of irregular strike pay. With the strike now in its sixth month, it is little wonder that both sides to the dispute were anxious for a settlement. The local branch secretary and several union members who had remained in town were reported to be in favour of declaring the strike off, and a return to work seemed imminent early in June when Wilson offered a minimum rate of 8s. 6d. per day. This olive branch was to no avail, however, as Jack Dash, the district secretary, could not be contacted: he had gone to Cloncurry, where a dispute over contracting and piecework had blossomed into a full-scale lock-out affecting 1500 men.³² Unable to secure official sanction for a settlement, the Ravenswood unionists again dug in their heels, and the strike was not called off until 16 July 1913, when a compulsory conference was summoned in Townsville by Judge Macnaughton. There it was agreed, on his recommendation, that the company should pay the 9s. per day for a 44 hour week, and that the men should resume work at once.³³

To the *Worker* the strike settlement was "a complete victory for the AWU":³⁴ a claim which ignored local reality in Ravenswood. In fact the union had placed a very low priority on resolving the dispute. Indicative of this attitude was a report by Dash early in April 1913, at the height of the strike, that there were "no disputes of a serious nature" in the northern district.³⁵ In their determination to win a paper victory over New Ravenswood, the AWU neglected the employment prospects of its members. Indeed, after seven months' strike involving loss of pay and hardship, the men involved gained little:

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only 20 or 30 former strikers secured their old jobs;³⁶ many returned to the Cloncurry district; others joined the general population drift from Ravenswood to the coastal towns and sugar districts.

It is difficult to assess the significance of the strike in contributing to the demise of Ravenswood. Wilson himself expressed reservations about the importance of the dispute as a cause of New Ravenswood's losses in 1913: development work confirmed the gloomy prospects of payable ore in the company's mines.³⁷ Certainly the lengthy strike had placed further strains on a company struggling to make returns; the terms of settlement obviously meant higher costs in the future. The strike was most significant, however, in its effect on New Ravenswood's London directors: it was a determining factor in their decision not to provide more capital for the mines.

For some years after 1913, New Ravenswood continued to extract gold, frequently winning enough to cover expenses - a tribute to Wilson's energy and commitment. However, rising costs and a shortage of materials made mining the narrow reefs increasingly uneconomic. A number of local miners joined the armed forces during the Great War, and their replacements were less skilled. One by one the mines closed, until finally in 1917 the New Ravenswood company ceased operations and was liquidated. By then the strike - Ravenswood's "last hurrah"³⁸ - was only a memory to the despondent residents who remained.

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