

Industrial Conflict at Mount Coolon, 1935

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The former gold-mining town of Mount Coolon is today remembered chiefly in North Queensland folklore as the scene of a personal tragedy which took place in 1918. More substantially, if less dramatically, in the 1930s the goldfield was a profitable concern for its parent company, Gold Mines of Australia, which in turn was the catalyst for the early growth of the mining giant, Western Mining Corporation. From an industrial relations perspective, the history of Mount Coolon is also significant. In 1935, a six-month strike starkly revealed many of the difficulties and tensions associated with isolated mining operations in semi-arid Australia. The dispute, which involved only some one hundred employees, also throws a glimmer of light on management tactics; relations between the Australian Workers' Union (AWU) and employers; collaboration among mining companies; and the alignment of ideological forces in the Queensland labour movement in the 1930s.*

Mount Coolon lies about 130 kilometres south-west of Collinsville and 200 kilometres north from Clermont. Discovered in 1913 by Luke Reynolds, a jackeroo from Yacamunda station, the single gold lode was first pegged by Thomas Coolon in the following year. Other claims were soon taken up; one of the more active prospectors was James Barclay who introduced the first battery to the field and, in 1917, consolidated claims to form the Native Bear lease, the lode's most valuable section. In November 1918, the ramshackle township of Mount Coolon made Australia-wide newspaper headlines, not because of a fabulous gold strike, but because of a calculated shooting incident costing the lives of five men. Thomas Coolon had lost his claim after an application for forfeiture by a man named Thompson was upheld by the warden's court. Seething at the perceived injustice of Thompson's action, and the court's subsequent dismissal of an appeal, Coolon armed himself, shot Thompson and one of his workers and later two other hands at the Sydney battery before turning the gun on

* The author gratefully acknowledges the assistance of Professor K. H. Kennedy in the preparation of this paper.

himself. That he made a will that same morning, and arranged for Barclay to provide for his wife before taking his own life, conferred on the murders an aura of tragedy in which newspaper feature writers revelled for over fifty years.¹

After the small community recovered from the shock and excitement of Coolon's escapade, Barclay restarted work on the Native Bear and, in 1919, won gold worth £6,691. Two years later, a new company, Mount Coolon Gold Mining Company No Liability took over the Coolon lease and erected a battery and mill. Production increased as did the value of gold won. In 1924, the state government provided a custom crushing plant, but the field entered a depression soon afterwards on account of severe drought, high production costs and diminishing yields. As the deepest shaft was down only some thirty metres, however, there was a strong conviction locally that with adequate capital and systematic development by company activity, Mount Coolon would still prove to be a rich field.

A revival of fortunes came in 1930. Largely on the initiative of W.S. Robinson, "who anticipated the devaluation of the Australian currency and the consequent scope for expansion of the gold industry", Gold Mines of Australia Limited [GMA] was registered in Melbourne in April 1930.² The company acquired options over the Mount Coolon and Native Bear leases and began a program of vigorous exploration. By August 1931 the options were exercised, and two months later Mount Coolon Gold Mines No Liability was floated.³ Money seemed no object: by early November 1932, production reached full capacity. The shaft was down 100 metres, two new levels had been driven, a treatment plant, power house, store, offices and workers accommodation and a concrete dam had been erected. To December 1934, total gold yield from Mount Coolon was nearly 79,000

¹ Mount Coolon file, Delamothe Collection, James Cook University Library.

² G. Lindesay Clark, *Built on Gold: Recollections of Western Mining*, Melbourne 1983, pp.2-4; see also W.S. Robinson, *If I Remember Rightly*, Melbourne 1967, pp.151-2.

³ Nominal authorised capital was £400 000 in 800 000 shares, of which Gold Mines of Australia retained 130 000. Sir Colin Fraser (chairman of GMA) was chairman of directors; the board included Alex Stewart, G.H. Robinson, Hal Sheppard and A.G. Campbell. GMA acted as general managers and consultants.

ounces, worth more than £300,000. There were anxieties, however, that the mines were rapidly approaching exhaustion.⁴

Mount Coolon had experienced some minor industrial trouble before 1935. Indeed, construction work was delayed for five weeks in 1932 by a dispute over the safe manning of an excavating machine.⁵ In May 1933 the Australian Workers' Union and the company concluded an agreement, duly registered by the state industrial court, prescribing wages and conditions at Mount Coolon. With the exception of electricians, fitters, and ticketed engine drivers, preference of employment was given to the AWU, establishing a union "closed shop" consistent with industrial awards and agreements for northern mining fields generally.⁶ Brisbane union officials expressed considerable satisfaction with the agreement, subsequently hailing it as "the best award in Australia"; while in his report for 1933 the under-secretary for mines noted that "amicable relations were firmly established between the company and its employees".⁷ Yet the 105 workers at Mount Coolon were scarcely enthusiastic: they at first voted to reject the agreement (for reasons not recorded), accepting it only when assurances were given them by the AWU's Townsville-based northern district secretary, W. B. Hay, who visited the field in June 1933. Nevertheless,

⁴ C.C. Morton, "Mount Coolon Goldfield" (Geological Survey Reports), *Queensland Government Mining Journal*, 15 June 1935, p.197.

⁵ *Bowen Independent*, 11 June 1932, 14 June 1932; Queensland Department of Mines, *Annual Report for 1932*, Brisbane 1933, p.34; *Industrial Australian and Mining Standard*, 15 October 1933, p.309.

⁶ *Queensland Industrial Gazette*, 24 June 1933, pp.157-160. Electricians were organised by the Electrical Trades Union [ETU]; fitters by the Amalgamated Engineering Union [AEU]; and engine-men by the Federated Engine-Drivers and Firemen's Association [FEDFA]. Under Queensland industrial law, agreements covering wages and employment conditions could be made between a union and an employer or employers' organisation; once registered by the industrial court, an agreement had the legal effect of an award.

⁷ Queensland Department of Mines, *Annual Report for 1933*, Brisbane 1934, p.37.

except for a four-day stoppage in June 1934, work proceeded without interruption until April 1935.⁸

Comparisons between the Mount Coolon agreement and other mining awards lent some support to the AWU's claim of superior conditions. While working hours were the standard forty-four a week, wage rates were slightly higher than on the Mount Morgan goldfield and at Mount Isa. To many employees, however, the marginally higher wages were off-set by harsh living conditions at Mount Coolon. The district is dry, dusty and usually hot. Amenities in the township were few: an hotel, butcher shop, post office with the only telephone on the field, and a recreation hall used as a general meeting place and as an occasional cinema theatre. The "comfortable and roomy" single men's quarters were in reality small, one-room fibro-and-iron huts ventilated by a solitary rear window.⁹ A chronic water shortage compounded the inhospitable environment.

These oppressive conditions were exacerbated in the summer of 1934-35 by a severe drought. The failure of the usual seasonal rains produced a parched, desolate landscape, dotted by dying and dead cattle. By early 1935, fresh milk was unobtainable in the town; fresh vegetables were trucked in from Bowen, 220 kilometres away. At the end of March 1935 the acting superintendent of Mount Coolon Gold Mines, Ian Morley, recorded that the temperature in the shade had reached over 38°Celsius (100°F) daily since October 1934, climbing over 40°Celsius (104°F) every day since 20 December. The shortage of water for milling operations was now critical; dust in the winzes and levels was a serious problem. In fact, plans were well

⁸ *The Advocate* (official organ of the Queensland branch of the Australian Railway Union), 15 July 1935; *Bowen Independent*, 13 June 1934, 15 June 1934.

⁹ *Industrial Australian and Mining Standard*, 15 October 1933, p.309. Lindsay Clark, *Built on Gold*, facing p.116, has a photograph of this company-provided accommodation. Mount Coolon's workforce was universally male and mainly single (including married men whose families resided elsewhere). A number of women and children, however, did live with their husbands and fathers at Mount Coolon. *Worker*, 18 June 1935.

advanced for closing-down the mine and laying-off nearly all employees from mid-May until possibly mid-November.¹⁰

It was in these circumstances that the truckers who loaded and hauled ore from the mine to the mill under a contract, or piece-work, system of payment became disgruntled with their earnings. In March mechanical holdups reduced the capacity of the mill; as a result the truckers handled less ore and their pay fell accordingly by an average of three shillings a day - from 22s. 6d. to 19s. 6d. - in the fortnight before 2 April 1935. Possibly aware of the prospective shut-down of the mine, and perhaps believing they had little to lose, on 4 April the truckers adopted "go-slow" tactics. These continued until the afternoon of Wednesday 10 April when in Morley's absence at Charters Towers, the men discussed their grievances with C.O. Turner, the mine accountant. Turner asked them for an assurance that the "go-slow" would stop; the truckers countered with a demand for higher contract rates. Turner replied that this would not be considered until the men were "working to capacity". The truckers walked off the job. At 8.00 p.m. they met at the shaft with the miners, who asked Turner to guarantee the truckers 22s. per shift. When this was refused all underground employees joined the truckers on strike.¹¹

The following morning Morley returned to Mount Coolon by 'plane. In the meantime a mass meeting of workers had formed a disputes committee and refined their demands, which now comprised: a guarantee of 22s. per shift for contract truckers; alternatively the work should be done on wages without a set tally or "driving" (constant supervision) by foremen; if a settlement were reached the men should not be victimised in securing their jobs. Determined not to negotiate until work resumed, Morley rejected the first two requests, and with regard to the third, said "that as the men had pulled out and drawn their pay they were no longer employees"; however, they would probably be re-engaged on application to the foreman. Faced

¹⁰ I.W. Morley to the Directors, Mount Coolon Gold Mines NL, 27 March 1935, Broken Hill Associated Smelters Pty Ltd - Sir Colin Fraser papers [BHAS], file 1/190, University of Melbourne Archives.

¹¹ J.M. Bridge, Memorandum to the Chairman, Mount Coolon Gold Mines NL, 11 April 1935, *ibid.*

with this response the men refused to return to work. That afternoon the mill hands also walked out.¹²

In the days that followed the company stood firm, preparing in fact for a mine shut-down earlier than had been anticipated. Machinery, tools and cages were removed from the mine and routine maintenance performed. On Friday 13 April, woodcutters and carters joined their fellow AWU members on strike. FEDFA and AEU men, however, stayed on the job, allowing the continued operation of the diamond drill in underground exploratory work.¹³ On 16 April the power plant closed down, cutting off all electricity in Mount Coolon. Many workers prepared to leave town, presaging an exodus which by mid-June left only some forty strikers (and, in some cases, their families) on the field.¹⁴

The Mount Coolon strike thus acquired all the hallmarks of a bitter and drawn-out industrial struggle, pitting rank-and-file unionists against not only the mine management but also other workers and especially their own union, the AWU, led by its state secretary, Clarrie Fallon.¹⁵ The dispute was initiated by local action without reference to the union organisation, even at district level. When Hay telegraphed from Townsville for information on the very first day of the strike, he was ignored by the local workers. His accompanying advice to the men to resume work and submit their grievances to arbitration in accordance with AWU policy was rejected. The disputes committee, led by left-wing activists Fillipo Bossone,¹⁶ Robert

¹² Bridge to Fraser, 12 April 1935, *ibid.*; *Townsville Daily Bulletin*, 13 April 1935; Inspector Henderson, Townsville, to Commissioner of Police, Brisbane, 12 April 1935, item 4553/1935, Home Secretary A/3759, Queensland State Archives.

¹³ Bridge to Fraser, 15 April 1935, BHAS 1/190.

¹⁴ *Townsville Daily Bulletin*, 17 April 1935; *Worker*, 18 June 1935.

¹⁵ Fallon was well on the way to becoming the *eminence grise* of the Labor Party in Queensland. He was state secretary of the AWU from 1933 until his death in 1950, and federal general secretary from 1940-1943; president of the state ALP from 1938-1950 and of the federal ALP from 1939.

¹⁶ Bossone had been gaoled in 1930 for delivering an inflammatory speech in the Brisbane Domain. In the late 1930s he became prominent in communist activities in the Ingham district. See D. Menghetti, *The Red North: the Popular Front in North Queensland*,

Brebner and Frank Kelly, declared that the strike could only be resolved by negotiations between themselves and management. Hay's arrival at Mount Coolon the following week did not change this stance. Indeed, his consultations with Morley - clearly normal in the circumstances - only served to confirm the militant conviction that the AWU was a "bosses' union".¹⁷ Consequently, when the Bowen industrial magistrate visited Mount Coolon on 23 April, he could do little except record that a strike existed, enabling state government officials to issue the standard instructions: that no unemployment relief was to be paid to the strikers.¹⁸

It was not until 6 June 1935 that the industrial court intervened in the dispute, convening a compulsory conference in Brisbane attended by Fallon for the AWU and Morley and Turner for the Mount Coolon Gold Mines. The claims submitted by Fallon were identical to those stated by the disputes committee with two additions: that compensation be given to the "locked-out" truckers for lost wages; and that bracemen¹⁹ have an offsider. After considerable discussion the company made an offer the next day:

The company is prepared to engage truckers on a day wages basis. There have been and will be no set tallies for truckers on wages and no "driving".

1. The company is prepared to give a new contract at the trucking contract prices operating at the time of the dispute.

Townsville 1981, p.88; G. Cresciani, "The Proletarian Migrants: Fascism and Italian Anarchists in Australia", *Australian Quarterly*, vol. 51, no. 1, March 1979, p.13.

¹⁷ *The Red Leader* (official journal of the Militant Minority Movement), 8 May 1935; *Worker*, 18 June 1935.

¹⁸ *Worker*, 18 June 1935; *The Red Leader*, 26 June 1935; *Trade Union Leader*, November 1935, p.83. Under the Queensland *Industrial Conciliation and Arbitration Act of 1932*, all stipendiary magistrates held office as industrial magistrates. Dealing mainly with claims for recovery of wages and breaches of awards, they were also authorised to conduct compulsory conferences on industrial disputes outside Brisbane.

¹⁹ Bracemen received the ore skip (or cage) at a "brace" approximately half-way up the mineshaft headframe, from where it was tipped or trucked on rails to the ground or to waiting transport. While usual practice was for only one braceman to be employed, the work was often hectic, and there was a risk of falling.

2. There will be no victimisation. On making application not later than Saturday, June 22, 1935, all men who were employed at the date of the dispute will be re-employed as soon as possible.²⁰

The claim for compensation was rejected on the grounds that, as certified by the industrial magistrate, an unauthorised strike (not a lock-out) existed. In reply to the request for an offsider for the bracemen, the company stated that if such was found necessary they would comply. Fallon thereupon telegraphed the results of the conference to the men at Mount Coolon. As Brebner, secretary of the disputes committee conceded, the company's offer appeared, on paper, to satisfy all the strikers' original demands. However, the company's good faith on the "no driving issue was questioned; the decision to leave contract prices unaltered was condemned; and the rider, "as soon as possible", to the "no victimisation" clause was considered inadequate. Moreover, the strikers re-affirmed their contention that a settlement could only be made between the company and the rank-and-file. The offer was rejected, earning the disputes committee a stinging rebuke from Fallon for playing a "despicable and low-down game".²¹

Disagreement between state officials of the AWU and the Mount Coolon workers reflected the internal conflict affecting that union and indeed the labour movement generally in the 1930s. Sections of the AWU membership, especially northern sugar workers and mine employees, became increasingly dismayed by the AWU's industrial restraint, political conservatism and bureaucratic control. Many rank-and-file unionists turned to either the Communist Party of Australia, whose influence was growing in North Queensland, or to the CPA's depression-bred industrial front, the Militant Minority Movement (MMM), for guidance. There were at least some members of the MMM at Mount Coolon as early as 1932.²² Communists, censuring the AWU as an active hindrance to the interests of the working class, were by no means alone in regarding the union as

²⁰ The conference was reported by Fallon in a lengthy article in the *Worker*, 18 June 1935.

²¹ *Ibid.*; *The Advocate*, 15 July 1935.

²² *The Red Leader*, 10 August 1932.

subservient to the Queensland Labor government and over-reliant on industrial arbitration. For their part, the officials of the AWU were hostile to the implications of revolutionary rhetoric and concerned about communist influence on the membership. With regard to mine workers, this concern came to a head in 1935 when the CPA promoted a campaign on behalf of the New South Wales Miners' Federation for a single mining union in Australia.²³ Disputes at Mount Isa in 1933 and at Collinsville in 1934 had already indicated some rank-and-file dissatisfaction with the Queensland AWU; the union vigorously resisted the militant challenge.²⁴

Such was the wider conflict into which Mount Coolon workers and management were drawn. To both the AWU and its opponents the real issue at stake was control over the mine workers: an essentially political battle which augured ill for early settlement of the strike. When a major strike erupted in the northern sugar districts in August - September 1935, both sides regarded the relatively minor dispute at Mount Coolon as merely part of that crucial struggle: the same heroes and villains were involved.²⁵ In the meantime, through its organ, the *Worker*, the union blamed "the intrusion of sinister outside influences" for the disruption, claiming it demonstrated the "mean, sordid tactics" of the CPA's Sydney-based conspiracy against the Queensland branch of the AWU - "the strongest supporter of the [Labor]

²³ *Ibid.*, 26 June 1935. The Miner's Federation was the common name for the Australian Coal and Shale Employees' Federation. In 1919 this union joined the Workers' Industrial Union of Australia [WIUA], of which the only other branch was the Broken Hill miners' union - actually titled the WIUA. With the exception of Broken Hill, most metalliferous miners in New South Wales, as in Queensland, belonged to the AWU. In 1934 the leadership of the Miners' Federation was taken over by MMM activists, who hoped to use the WIUA as the base for a single union in the mining industry. See R. Gollan, *Revolutionaries and Reformists: Communism and the Australian Labour Movement 1920-1955*, Canberra 1975, pp.9, 30-31, 71; K.F. Walker, *Australian Industrial Relations Systems*, Cambridge Mass. 1970, pp.209-236.

²⁴ *Workers' Weekly*, 1 December 1933; *The Red Leader*, 17 January 1934, 7 March 1934; *Worker*, 8 February 1933, 22 November 1933.

²⁵ D. Menghetti, "The Weil's Disease Strike, 1935", in D.J. Murphy (ed.), *The Big Strikes: Queensland 1889-1965*, St Lucia 1983, pp.202-216.

Party in this State".²⁶ Utilising the columns of *The Red Leader*, *The Advocate*, *Workers' Weekly*, and the *Trade Union Leader*, the Mount Coolon strike committee responded with attacks on the "treachery" of the officials, especially "Fox" Fallon, and the "triple alliance" of company, union and government.²⁷ As Morley recalled, his telephone conversations with Clarence Byrne, of the mining consultancy which acted as Brisbane agents of GMA, also inflamed the strike in an unexpected manner:

I used to 'phone Clarrie [Byrne] from the public 'phone, which was very public - and then it was alleged by the strikers that I was 'phoning Clarrie Fallon!.....this caused further complications.²⁸

After the failure of the compulsory conference in June, the company directors became increasingly concerned about the situation at Mount Coolon. When no-one had returned to work at the mine by 22 June, a special board meeting, attended by the managing director of GMA, Lindesay Clark, and the general secretary and deputy secretary of the Australian Mines and Metals Association was held in Melbourne on 27 June 1935. There it was decided to shut down the mine; and to issue a press release stating that "the unsatisfactory industrial situation and the shortage of water" forced the company to suspend operations, "in all probability" for some months, until adequate rain fell. The meeting also agreed to convene a conference with the other major Queensland mining companies - Mount Morgan, Mount Isa and Golden Plateau²⁹ - to devise a common policy "in relation to the endeavours which are being made by the WIU of Australia to transfer industrial control of the mining camps in Queensland from the AWU to the Miners' Federation". It was hoped that such a conference

²⁶ Worker, 18 June 1935, 16 July 1935, 27 August 1935.

²⁷ *Workers' Weekly*, 10 May 1935; *The Red Leader*, 8 May 1935; *Trade Union Leader*, September 1935, p. 46; *The Advocate*, 15 July 1935.

²⁸ I.W. Morley, taped interview conducted by Dr Peter Bell, Brisbane, 25 April 1983, Tape 3 [hereafter Morley Memoirs].

²⁹ Golden Plateau NL mined gold at Cracow in Central Queensland from 1931 to 1976.

would be attended by both the AWU and the state Minister for Labour and Industry.³⁰

After a preliminary meeting of the companies' representatives, the conference of the mining companies and the AWU was held in Brisbane on 26 July. The Queensland government, perhaps believing that it might be accused of siding with the employers - at any rate not wishing to become overtly involved in the dispute - was not represented.³¹ The conference, which went unnoticed by the press, achieved a high degree of consensus for a meeting between employers and a union whose members were on strike. It was agreed that the stoppage was completely unjustified, though the AWU pointed to the "unique circumstances" of the water shortage, which caused many "reliable" men to leave the field in the belief that by the time the strike was over little or no work would be available. While the companies saw the Mount Coolon dispute as "the start of job control tactics in the metal mining industry", the union linked it with cane field disturbances by labelling it the work of communists. The companies also agreed to support the AWU, and not to deal with unofficial committees. The only minor note of discord arose with the companies' suggestion that the AWU executive "had not done enough to keep in touch with and control its members."³²

³⁰ Mount Coolon Gold Mines No Liability, Board Minutes, 27 June 1935, Western Mining Corporation records, file 2/23/1, University of Melbourne Archives. The board further instructed Morley to serve notice to non-employees to vacate the company's house at Mount Coolon; this decision, however was later rescinded: *ibid.*, 10 July 1935.

³¹ Mount Coolon was represented by Turner, Byrne, and J.M. Bridge of Gold Mines of Australia; the AWU by Fallon and branch president J.C. Lamont; other representatives were Messrs Meagher (Australian Mines and Metals Association), Moffitt (Mount Isa), Boyd and Fitzgerald (Mount Morgan), and Miller and Fitzgerald (Golden Plateau). J.M. Bridge, memorandum to G. Lindsay Clark re "Conference at Brisbane on Industrial Matters, 25 and 26 July 1935", n.d., BHAS 1/190. The relationship between the AWU and the state government made it highly likely that the latter was kept fully informed about the dispute, including this conference.

³² *Ibid.* "Job control", a term originating in syndicalist ideology, could range in meaning from the enforcement of closed shop arrangements to complete worker management of industry. In the circumstances of the Mount Coolon dispute it meant increased employee control of the pace and method of work, less supervision and, more generally, direct

Both sides, however, considered it an inopportune time to call off the strike: a full-scale resumption of operations was not possible; partial resumption on ore-breaking would not absorb even the men remaining on the field. "The position would be misrepresented", the meeting concurred, "as vindictive action on the part of the Company and an instance of victimisation of the men not engaged". Perhaps the most significant decision of the conference came when the four companies and the AWU agreed to finance equally a publicity campaign to the tune of £2000 to combat communist propaganda, with the aim of informing the public of "the efforts being made to undermine the arbitration court and the AWU, and to institute job control methods".³³ Had this decision alone been reported, it clearly would have been seen by the strikers and their supporters as further evidence of collusion between the Mount Coolon company and the AWU.

Given the attitudes of the company and the AWU as revealed in the conference it is not surprising that the dispute remained unresolved in the following weeks. At Mount Coolon the strikers expressed their determination to stay out, organising shooting parties to hunt game, setting up a soup kitchen, and continuing to seek financial assistance from other unionists. Donations reportedly totalled over £1200, with most coming from North Queensland workers and a substantial amount from Sydney, reflecting the publicity given the strike by the left-wing press.³⁴ Indeed, the prominent coverage by those journals probably hardened the resolve of the AWU and the company to resist the local workers, in the belief that wider issues were at stake. The Queensland Trades and Labour Council followed the lead of the AWU in refusing to acknowledge the disputes committee. After a particularly vigorous speech by Fallon, the Council on 28 August

negotiations between management and workers, avoiding industrial tribunals and official union channels (that is, control "on the job").

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *The Advocate*, 15 October 1935; *Trade Union Leader*, September 1935, p.48.

condemned the CPA's tactics in both the sugar and Mount Coolon strikes as "detrimental to Trade Unionism".³⁵

By this time GMA was moving to re-organise its Mount Coolon operations. Morley was summoned to Melbourne, where Lindesay Clark told him, "I think we'd better give it away and we'll start afresh".³⁶ Consequently, senior staff at Mount Coolon were transferred to the Western Australian Triton mine, which was being developed by Western Mining Corporation.³⁷ Morley himself left the company to take up the position of general manager of Georgetown Gold Mines, and Turner was named acting superintendent of Mount Coolon.³⁸

By the end of September 1935, with summer rainfall expected within a few months, a limited return to work seemed probable. Yet the local disputes committee still held out for direct negotiations, boycotting a compulsory conference, this time at Mount Coolon, on 30 September.³⁹ Finally, the company conceded the point: on 10 October the disputes committee met with GMA executive J.M. Bridge, who had been sent to Mount Coolon "to smooth over things and start again"; and the strike was called off that day.⁴⁰

³⁵ Queensland Trades and Labour Council, Minutes, 28 August 1935. Fallon's full speech was printed in the *Worker* on 3 September 1935. In it he said: I pledge you my position in the Labor Movement, and pledge you everything I hold sacred, that [the truckers] were receiving a piecework rate which enabled them to earn at the rate of 24s. 10d. a day..." This statement sits uneasily besides the company's record that the usual average was 22s. 6d. per day.

³⁶ Morley Memoirs.

³⁷ In 1933 GMA had been re-organised: a new company, Western Mining Corporation Limited (WMC) was formed to manage the syndicate's interests in Western Australia. GMA was limited to eastern Australia. Lindesay Clark, *Built on Gold*, pp.11-12.

³⁸ Morley Memoirs; Mount Coolon Gold Mines NL, Board Minutes, 7 August 1935, 2/23/1.

³⁹ *Courier-Mail*, 1 October 1935.

⁴⁰ Morley Memoirs; *Bowen Independent*, 11 October 1935.

Headlines in the communist press hailed the "victory at Mount Coolon":⁴¹ a judgement difficult to sustain as the terms of settlement were precisely those arrived at on 7 June by the compulsory conference in Brisbane. Moreover, full scale operations at Mount Coolon were not resumed for nearly four months; until then only exploratory drilling and ore-breaking could proceed. The dam was eventually filled by a storm on 12 January 1936 and normal operations were resumed on 3 February.⁴²

The Mount Coolon Company's production of gold for 1935 was seriously affected. Only 7,987 ounces were produced, against 21,000 in 1934. The mill did not recommence operations until February 1936, but diamond drilling during and after the strike had revealed new shoots and an energetic development program was pursued. From 39,446 tons of ore 21,7377 ounces of gold and 7,092 ounce of silver, valued at £188,481, were won in 1936. This was the last profitable year: the gold content was dropping, and as the local warden remarked, "ore shoots lose character at depth". Drought forced a suspension of milling from February to October 1937. The outlook was not good. When geophysicists from the Northern Australia Survey failed to locate new ore bodies, the company was forced to reassess its commitment. The decision to halt mining operations in 1938 and mill all broken ore was sensible given no new finds after extensive prospecting. For 1938, the mill yielded nearly 16,000 ounces of gold and 7,000 ounces of silver from 52,721 tons of ore. Operations ceased on 28 February 1939. The mine was let to tributors whose poor returns led the under-secretary for mines to remark that Mount Coolon "cannot now be regarded as a mineral producing field."⁴³ The township was abandoned, and the company homes sold for removal to other areas.

The most interesting feature of the Mount Coolon dispute was that it could not be resolved for several months simply because none of the

⁴¹ *Workers' Weekly*, 22 October 1935; E.A. Knight, "The Mt. Coolon Strike Victory", *Trade Union Leader*, November 1935, p. 38.

⁴² Mount Coolon Gold Mines NL, Managing Director's Report, 15 April 1936, BHAS 1/134.

⁴³ Queensland Department of Mines, *Annual Reports* for 1935, p.42; 1936, p.40; 1937, p.40; 1938, p.36; 1939, p.38.

protagonists seriously wanted it resolved. The mine management were already anticipating a prolonged shut-down on account of weather conditions (which in the event persisted for the entire year) when the strike occurred. They lost little or nothing in production. Consequently they had no incentive to take the indispensable step for settlement - entering into direct negotiations - especially as that would entail the risk of worsening industrial relations throughout the mining industry by alienating the AWU and strengthening the hand of the militants. As the strike proceeded they became principally concerned about those wider industrial ramifications. Hence their attempts to join with other companies in devising a common labour relations policy, and - in concert with the AWU - mount a campaign against employee militancy. Only when the approach of the wet season could be expected did they meet directly with the disputes committee.

The AWU executive, vehemently opposed to the strike, nevertheless did not favour any resolution at a time which would leave most of their members still unemployed and susceptible to left-wing charges that they had been sold out. As for the strikers themselves, any settlement which did not involve them was suspect. Well aware that full-scale operations could not be resumed until the water supply improved, they were determined to circumvent the AWU and consequently stayed out until the company negotiated directly with the disputes committee. Nevertheless the strike was at best a hollow victory for the workers, who might have returned to work with equal success in June. On the other hand, were it not for the initial intransigence of the mine management, the strike may not have occurred at all: Morley himself admitted that he was "not very tactful" in handling the dispute.⁴⁴

In retrospect, neither could the AWU derive much satisfaction from the strike. Fallon's comment that it "would have been settled on the first day" if left in the hands of the union executive⁴⁵ may have been correct as far as the industrial matters were concerned. However, these ceased to be the main issue for any of the parties concerned soon after the strike began. Fallon's

⁴⁴ Morley Memoirs.

⁴⁵ Australian Workers' Union, Queensland Branch, *Official Report of the 23rd Annual Delegate Meeting*, Brisbane, January 1936, p. 15.

successor Edgar Williams recalled the "Mt Coolon hold-up" simply as a "body-snatching" attempt by the "comms".⁴⁶ There is some substance to this recollection: the strike as it persisted was clearly directed as much against the AWU as against the company. But the strike leaders, many of whom were communists, turned to their advantage a situation they had done little, and the AWU much, to create. Williams' remarks, however, are indicative of the blinkered approach of the AWU. It was obvious from the first that, as the mining companies charged, the union bureaucrats had lost touch with rank-and-file members at Mount Coolon. They made no effort to improve the situation during the course of the dispute. After Hay's brief visit in April 1935, no union official came to the field until the end of September, when organiser Tom Dougherty was sent - at the company's prompting - to attend the compulsory conference.

The AWU appeared to learn nothing from the lesson of Mount Coolon: a persistent feature of industrial relations in the sugar fields, shearing sheds and mines of Queensland was the poor communication between the union executive and sections of its membership. Thirty years later, industrial conflict at Mount Isa showed essentially the same elements. One of the parallels between the Mount Coolon dispute and the Mount Isa strikes of 1961 and 1964-65 was the evident lack of credibility of the AWU among workers.

⁴⁶ C.W.E. Williams, *Yellow, Green and Red*, Brisbane 1967, pp.68-72.