Sydney's Anti-Eviction Movement: Community or Conspiracy?

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In the last week of June 1931, a doctor in a Sydney hospital was surprised by a seven-year-old patient whose crushed toe had been acquired in a novel fashion. The *Sun* reported:

> 'We was playin' evictions,' [the boy] fearfully told the doctor, 'and I was a pleeceman an' 'e' – pointing to another small and grimy boy – 'was a Communist. 'E threw a brick and it hit me on the toe.'

> Yelling at the top of their voices, a dozen small boys in Simons Street Newtown had staged a 'mock' battle between police and anti-evictionists.

> Swinging sticks and firing imaginary revolvers the 'police' routed the anti-evictionists' who, in desperation, began throwing stones.[1]

As Iona and Peter Opie point out, the games and rituals of children reveal 'a thriving unselfconscious culture'.[2] This culture pertains not just to the children themselves, but to the lives of their families and neighbours. In this game, the Newtown kids revealed the impact on the whole community of the real anti-eviction battle which had taken place in the suburb ten days earlier. And in the particular way in which they adapted the traditional cops and robbers game, these little boys revealed how much they knew about what had really happened. After all, in the standard game, both sides would have imaginary guns. Yet here – as in the real battles – only the police were shooting. As the battle took place on a school day, the children must have learned their information from listening to their parents.

While the anti-eviction campaign conducted by the Unemployed Workers Movement (UWM) in Sydney in the first half of 1931 has been studied as an expression of radicalism and militancy in the Great Depression,[3] this small-scale and localised movement also provides a window into the way in which urban working class communities functioned during the economic crisis. Yet if we are taking the Newtown boys' game as oral historical evidence, it is only fair to ask whether their parents knew what they were talking about when they spoke of 'Communists'. Did they mean actual Party members, or was this just a catch phrase borrowed from the establishment press?

This question is crucial to whether or not the Sydney anti-eviction movement can be seen as an expression of a working class community, composed of individuals with free will and intelligence. Alternatively, did it simply represent the actions of a tiny revolutionary vanguard of the Communist Party of Australia during the Third Period of organisation ? Or was the campaign perhaps the brainchild of a single Communist puppeteer? Indeed, were the wires being pulled by the American double agent H. M. (Harry) Wicks who, as Herbert Moore, was supposedly the Comintern's secret agent, but who was really an FBI agent?[4] Such a person could well attempt to work as an agent provocateur, manipulating Party members into extremist actions in the hope of instigating police repression or ultimately even the banning of the Communist Party. Even more strangely, were the police themselves trying to 'set up' the anti-evictionists by offering them arms or explosives, in order to justify repression?

To attempt to search out the truth, we have to look to the origins of the anti-eviction movement.

Certainly the UWM was established as a Communist fraternal or front. While this was a national organisation, the executive was based in Sydney – as of course was the Party Executive – but front organisations were set up to work at the level of local suburb or country town, and were intended to attract working men and women who were not CPA members. Indeed, in a directive explaining the role of fraternals, the Party stressed:

> It is important to note that none of these organisations are Communist. Each has a specific role to fulfil; each has to be made into a broad non-party mass organisation. Party members work inside each as fractions – we do not aim to and repudiate attempts at mechanical control.[5]

Of course, in theory the radicalising of workers through the 'mass organisations' was part of the preparation for the world wide revolutionary struggle which would naturally occur as a culmination of the Class Against Class battles of the Third Period. The initial platform of the UWM was based on the unemployed program of the Red International of Labor Unions, adapted to Australian conditions.[6] Yet in practice, the annual marches on International Unemployed Day were the only evidence that the organisation had a global policy. On the practical level, the UWM could not function even as a *national* organisation, because unemployed relief (whether dole or relief work) was given by state rather than federal governments. This meant that, while there could be overall goals, particular policy and the tactics adopted to implement that policy usually had to be developed at the state level. Even in the one state, regional differences – between the city and the bush, or between the rural towns and mining towns – offered further opportunities for independence. A study of a number of unemployed workers' campaigns at community level reveals that for practical purposes, an alliance of local UWM groups would often develop protest tactics in response to local circumstances or needs. The South Coast Dole Riots of May 1931 are one such example[7]; the Sydney anti-eviction campaign of the next month is yet another.

It almost goes without saying that the opposition to evictions was national UWM policy. With the dole being given in the form of goods or coupons rather than as cash, it was impossible for many unemployed workers to pay rent. In working class suburbs, it was common to see bailiffs dumping furniture onto the footpath, pushing women and children onto the street. Even more common was the sight of strings of boarded-up terrace houses, which nobody could afford to rent. If anything demonstrated the idiocy as well as the injustice of the capitalist system it was the fact that in many situations the landlords did not even gain anything from evicting people.

And so from its inauguration in April 1930 the UWM pledged itself against evictions. The policy was spelled out in July that year, at the UWM's first major conference. Thus Demand #6 noted that 'All evictions of unemployed and seizures of furniture and belongings for failure to pay rent must be prohibited'; the 'Method' of implementation was to:

> Organise vigilance committees in neighbourhoods to patrol working class districts and resist by mass action the eviction of unemployed workers from their houses, or attempts on behalf of bailiffs to remove furniture, or gas men to shut off the gas supply.[8]

On the last day of this conference – Monday 28 July 1930 – there was even an attempt to carry out Demand #6. This

incident would provide a useful model for how *not* to conduct an anti-eviction campaign. On this Monday morning, an unemployed musician living in the beachside suburb of Clovelly was evicted, along with his wife and eight children. A bailiff took possession of their furniture and began to auction it. At the Unemployed Conference at the Trades Hall, a note was handed to the platform; the speaker, Bob Shayler, read out news of what was happening in Clovelly to the two hundred or so participants[9], then asked what they intended doing about it.

'We will beat up the bailiffs!' the people replied. *'We will stop the eviction!'* Shayler then allegedly urged: 'I want twenty men who are not afraid of the police to go out and stop the sale, and if the sale is over to smash the house so they won't do it again.' Shayler would deny having made such a call, and it is likely that at least some of the urge for direct action came from Constables Cook and Neville, the two undercover policemen who had been watching the Communist Party for months, under orders to pick out the militants.[10]

However the decision came about, a couple of dozen men caught a tram to Clovelly. By now it was early afternoon, and the auction was over; the evicted family as well as their possessions had gone. Neighbours spotted the men's arrival, but the *Sydney Morning Herald* would report that 'No one realised the seriousness of the situation until the raiders were running away from the house'. Police would later allege that the men rushed into the house and broke every door and window, shattered mantelpieces and light fittings. After a 'remarkably brief time' they caught another tram back to the city. It was only then that the neighbours rang the police. Some hours later, police raided the Communist hall and 'selected the men they had come to arrest'. A 'wild melee' broke out, and eventually eleven prisoners were taken away. They would be charged with malicious damage to the value of 40 pounds.

A fortnight later, when the case came up, seven more men were added to the list (and one original name was dropped). Meanwhile Shayler and another man had been separately charged with incitement; they were sentenced to six months hard labour. Soon four more men – including Jack Sylvester, leader of the Balmain UWM – were added to the initial charge, so that when the malicious damage case came up at Quarter Sessions in November there were 21 'Clovelly Boys' in the dock. All were convicted, although a number including Sylvester had clearly not taken part in the event. Good behaviour bonds for two years were offered as an alternative to gaol sentences of six to eight months, but as these would stop militancy, eleven men chose gaol. It is likely that the other ten men were not Party members. [11] After a three week hunger strike and wide public agitation, the recently elected Lang government was forced to open an Inquiry Commission, and Sylvester and at least one other prisoner were released.[12] Yet at the end of January 1931 ten still remained in gaol.[13]

Overall, 'the Clovelly Frame Up' (as the *Workers' Weekly* dubbed the event) cost the fledgling unemployed movement a great deal of time and militant energy – and for absolutely no gain. Yet while the spying, the trumped up charges, and the heavy sentences showed the lengths to which the state would go in order to crush the UWM, the moral of the story is contained in the description of the reactions of the Clovelly neighbours when they saw a bunch of complete strangers arrive in the street, race into the house, out again, and down to the tram stop. Of course the local people didn't dob – at least not till the men were away. But nor did they give the activity any moral, let alone physical, support. As a spontaneous one-off action done from outside, with absolutely no grassroots preparation of the community, it was bound to fail.

By the opening of 1931, the UWM was realising the need to enact the 'method' proposed at the July Conference of organising 'vigilance committees in neighbourhoods' in order to resist eviction by 'mass action'.

In the early months of 1931, the Unemployed Workers' Movement in New South Wales began building itself as a mass organisation. At this same time, Jack Sylvester became UWM National Secretary. Though Hall Greenland maintains that 'behind the scenes the real controllers were the leaders of the Communist Party, themselves acting under orders from Harry Wicks',[14] it is hard to see the charismatic and independent Sylvester as anyone's puppet or front guy. Eighteen months later he would move into an open breach with the Party,[15] and it is likely that already Sylvester was in disagreement with the hierarchy. Certainly the whole philosophy of building from the suburban or community level was in keeping with Sylvester's beliefs and with the practice of his own very successful UWM local in Balmain.

According to the *Workers' Weekly,* over this February and March new branches of the UWM were formed over a wide area of working class Sydney – including outer suburbs such as Parramatta, Liverpool and Granville in the west, Hurstville and Kogarah in the south west, Bondi and Paddington in the east, and Crows Nest and Chatswood on the north side of the harbour, as well as branches in the densely populated inner suburbs such as Surry Hills and Glebe, Newtown and Annandale. In some areas, such as Bankstown and Balmain, the UWM was joined by 'formerly unaffiliated organisations' – either the Labor Party's Unemployed Workers' Union or social welfare groups.[16]

These local branches would usually have 'special interest committees', such as an anti-eviction committee. An activist – whether or not a Party member – might belong to two or three such committees, or to another fraternal organisation, depending on his or her interests, abilities and gender. For example, women would probably also belong to the local Workers' International Relief (WIR) group, which provided food or shelter or other practical help when workers and their families were in need. And single men – often those living at a UWM hostel in one of the inner Sydney suburbs – would sometimes also join the local unit of the Workers' Defence Corps.[17] As the middle word of its name suggests, the WDC aimed to train a group which could ward off attacks – whether from the police, or from the emerging New Guard, or indeed from a certain strong arm gang associated with Jock Garden's ruling faction at the Trades Hall. Though the organisation was meant to be developed along military lines, at most it would only have included a couple of hundred men, of whom perhaps 20 or 30 provided the militancy and the muscle. Most recruits quickly left this Red version of Dad's Army in embarrassment or boredom, after spending a couple of Saturdays drilling with sticks in the local park, followed by hours of Leninist theory.

Though the UWM was scattered across Sydney's suburbs, to some extent this movement should be seen as the expression of a single working class community – composed of a number of individual suburban communities, which in turn were made up of people of diverse ages and backgrounds, and of both genders. The links were made by the people themselves: the Sydney unemployed movement did indeed move about. Without the price of a train or bus fare, these people walked;[18] without a radio, and without the price of a ticket to the movies, these people talked. And as the unemployed journeyed from suburb to suburb, they carried with them various forms of what could be dubbed 'infotainment'. Moving about, gathering on street corners, visiting each other, gossiping, yarning, singing, scribbling chalk messages onto pavements, passing on news either orally or by way of a roughly printed news sheet – what else was there to do all day? Through the first six months of 1931, an increasingly exciting topic of conversation was

the UWM's campaign against evictions. And in some suburbs, a house under an eviction order would provide a sort of clubhouse for a variety of social and political get-togethers.

When word of a threatened eviction came to the anti-eviction committee of a UWM branch, the decision about what sort of action to take – and indeed whether to take action at all – was decided at the branch level. The UWM was selective in deciding which cases to fight, and was not willing to subject people unnecessarily to the dangers of violence and arrests, or even to the time-consuming business of deputations and protest meetings. For example, all the disputed cases concerned families, though if the UWM were looking for trouble it could more easily have mounted a militant protest over the eviction of single men. In June the tabloid *Smith's Weekly* ran a comprehensive interview with Peters, secretary of the Redfern UWM, who described the organisation's 'eviction rules' as 'pretty stringent'. He explained that: 'The anti eviction committee first of all makes searching inquiries as to the bona fides of each case before we agree to lend our support.' Peters had earned 1000 pounds a year in the piano trade before the Depression, and was openly anti-Communist:

> Our members are not scarlet-died, fire-eating Communists, as people seem to think. They're just ordinary decent fellows out of work, and all they ask is a fair deal... I don't deny that a few extreme Reds have wormed their way into our organisation, as they have wormed in everywhere. But they are entirely in the minority, and we are doing our utmost to bump them out.[19]

At the risk of moving a little ahead in the story, it should be pointed out that the Redfern branch had recently been involved in the first confrontation with police. Either Peters was a complete dupe, or the movement really had a community base.

Through the early months of 1931, a number of different tactics were used by different branches of the UWM. In January, for example, a deputation accompanied by a protest meeting was enough to change the minds of the owners in cases at Glebe, Annandale, Granville, Waverley, and three cases at Balmain.[20] Sometimes the methods of persuasion may have included veiled threats, with a few WDC members as potential enforcers. Thus in April the eviction committee of the Bondi-Waverley UWM (which had its own WDC group) accompanied a tenant to a meeting with an agent who planned to issue an eviction order. The committee reported that 'matters were explained' to the agent 'in no uncertain manner on what action we were prepared to put into operation'. The tenant was allowed to stay in the house, and his rent was reduced from 25 shillings to five shillings a week.[21]

Another common tactic, called 'picketing', obviously developed from the union practice of gathering at a factory gate. In this variation, pickets would mount a sustained protest on the footpath outside the threatened house. This happened in April in the outer western suburb of Granville. After ten days, the UWM called a truce to discuss terms offered by the owners and a few days later the picket was called off because a mass meeting had decided that the tenant should accept the owner's offer of another cottage and removal expenses, although the tenant himself wanted the fight to continue. In this case it is again clear that the UWM had a community base. Though the branch secretary, Bateman, was a Communist, he declared that of the 500 members of the branch, only 17 were members of the Party. And a Granville ALP alderman agreed that 'there were a number of Communists in the movement, but they were not in control'.[22] This tactic was familiar to trade unionists, and it fitted the sociable nature of the unemployed movement. Women could join in and children could play on the street. If it rained, the pickets could move off the footpath and gather on the veranda. It would only seem a small step between picketing outside, and picketing inside – and indeed the word 'pickets' was used interchangeably for

defenders inside the houses and demonstrators outside. Often too the pickets themselves would be interchangeable, with men rostered at different times to take a turn inside, or out on the line.[23]

The first record of picketing inside a Sydney house is a case in Surry Hills in late February. The tactic came about when bailiffs acting for the real estate company made two attempts to gain possession of the house over the weekend. After receiving legal advice that 'any time was legal, and any trick could be used to gain entry' the Surry Hills UWM decided it was 'necessary' for members 'to remain on the premises in sufficient numbers to at any time defeat any attempt by police or bailiffs to gain admittance'. As well as occupying the house with a constant group of pickets, the UWM continued to hold mass meetings at the scene every day. These were attended by large numbers of local residents. A WIR committee provided food for the pickets, and there were contributions of food, tobacco and even cash from local shopkeepers and those lucky enough to have a job. This went on for two or three weeks.[24]

An occupation in the south western suburb of Lakemba in May also aroused considerable popular support. The *Sydney Morning Herald* reported that after the first mass meeting at the house, hundreds of unemployed from the whole district 'paraded' through the streets of this and neighbouring suburbs, including Bankstown. After the pickets had remained in the house a week, the owner decided that the tenant could remain rent free until he found work.[25] As well as offering an escape from the demoralisation of unemployment through action, the activities around the houses provided a welcome social outlet in these bleak times. When the Lakemba occupation was concluded, a participant wrote: 'Many of the pickets are sorry the siege is over. Every night a concert was held on the front lawn, followed by lectures and debates.'[26]

Overall, the combination of tactics was so successful that the UWM in Sydney won every single eviction case which it took on during the first five months of 1931.[27] Towards the end of May, houses were being occupied in at least six suburbs – Redfern, Leichhardt, Bankstown, Newtown, Glebe and Guildford. In the face of swelling community feeling, it is little wonder if the large rental companies became anxious. The *Workers Weekly* would later claim that the landlords held a delegation to Premier Lang, asking him to use the police to enforce evictions.[28] There is no evidence of this, and indeed it appears that the Labor Government was loathe to involve the state forces in the embarrassing situation of putting workers' families onto the streets. Chief Secretary Gosling would state in Parliament that he had 'repeatedly made representations to the magistrates urging them not to issue these [ejectment] orders to the police but to the bailiffs'.[29] Perhaps the magistrates were under pressure from the landlords to protect the rights of property owners.[30] Whatever the case, from the end of May, the courts began to direct the police to enforce the orders.[31] Many members of the police force were only too happy to take on the job.

There is no room here to go into a blow by blow account of the increasingly confrontational eviction battles which broke out successively in Redfern on Saturday May 30, Leichhardt on Friday 5 June, Bankstown on Wednesday 17 June, and in Newtown two days later. In the light of recurring conspiracy theories, it is timely to take a close look at who was involved in these battles, both as participants and behind the scenes.

We return firstly to the question of the role of the Communist Party hierarchy. In his history of the CPA, Stuart Macintyre notes that 'there were major confrontations in Sydney during 1931 after [the Party's] political bureau pronounced the anti-eviction campaign "the main point of struggle"'; these politbureau pronouncements are dated 13 May and 20 June.[32] This is true in a way, but were these pronouncements a directive, or simply

a record of fact? By the second week of May, the campaign had well and truly taken off at local level. By 20 June, the four bloody battles had taken place. So if the Party did order the occupations of houses, the order was not given in this form.

An additional argument in favour of the local or community-based nature of this movement is the fact that it erupted at this time only in Sydney. After all, the CPA was a national party, and if the directive had come from above, then we should expect to find anti-eviction occupations in other places in the first half of 1931– either in other cities such as Melbourne, or in New South Wales coal towns.

But perhaps, as Hall Greenland suggests, the whole campaign was due to H. M. Wicks:

> In mid-1931, in order to expose the perfidious nature of the new Labor Government, Wicks decided to hold a series of pitched battles with police over evictions. Houses with impending eviction orders in the Sydney suburbs of Bankstown and Newtown, and another in Newcastle, were barricaded and sandbagged. 'Labor's' police were then challenged to dislodge the mostly imported Communist defenders. The police rose to the challenge with great brutality and while the bashings outraged Labor supporters in those suburbs, no effort was made by the UWM – nor could be made, for they were social fascists – to involve those Labor supporters in the defence of these suburban Alamos. Sylvester was unhappy with this ultra-leftism and the crass Party manipulation it represented.[33]

Even leaving aside the fact that the bloody Newcastle battle at Tighes Hill occurred a year later, in June 1932, it is hard to accept this interpretation. It is probably reasonable that no evidence is cited for Wicks's decision: double agents no doubt don't leave a lot of paperwork. However, if the whole thing was planned as a trap to lure the police into a confrontation, it is curious that the May issues of the *Workers' Weekly* give no hint that the eviction campaign is coming to a head. No public call was ever made to occupy houses, and through May and even June the only tactic advised was to form anti-eviction committees and hold mass meetings. While the barricading only began after the police (with batons and revolvers drawn[34]) broke into the Redfern house, a careful study of each battle shows a gradual escalation of fortifications and weapons, as if the pickets were developing the occupation tactic in response to information passed along the community grapevine, rather than blindly obeying one man's orders.

The reference to 'mostly imported Communist defenders' is misleading. The three men arrested in the scrimmage at Redfern included the young Koori, Noel Eatock, whose brother Dick would soon be arrested at Bankstown, and who would himself be arrested on false charges in the Glebe Dole Riot in October of the next year. In mid 1931, the Eatock boys were probably Communists, but this family was not known for toeing party lines. The boys' mother – a former member of the Industrial Workers of the World, or Wobblies – was at this time a member of the ALP as well as being a member of the UWM Executive.[35] Jack Sylvester may have become unhappy with the ultra-leftism of the anti-eviction battles, but it was his support for the Eatock family which would lead to his own split with the Party after the Glebe Dole Riot.

A study of the backgrounds of other anti-eviction activists reveals a similarly complex situation. Half a dozen of the 16 Bankstown Boys (including Dick Eatock) lived in the local area, and others came from Lidcombe, Belmore and Clyde as well as suburbs closer to the CPA's city headquarters. But the issue of where the pickets lived is irrelevant, because the unemployed community crossed suburban boundaries.[36] As to the political affiliations of these 16, it is clear that the 17-year-old Alexander Mackaroff was a complete political naive, who simply came to the house on the previous night because he'd been invited to play his violin.[37] A couple

of others (Jack Hansen and Andrew 'Scotty' Thompson) were former Wobblies, as was 'Joe' Griffen the secretary of the Bankstown UWM. Parsons, the tenant,[38] was a very new member of the Communist Party and WDC; more significantly, he was a World War I digger. Jack Hansen, John Terry and Claude Stevens were also veterans. An equally diverse picture emerges from a study of the Newtown pickets. Overall, these men (apart from Mackaroff) certainly shared a militant commitment. Some were Communists. But they were not Party hacks. If anything, they seem to have been acting despite the wishes of their superiors. Soon the Party would attack the eviction fighters as left adventurists. Within a year or so, Dick Eatock would even be expelled from the Bankstown branch of the Young Communist League.[39]

If we are looking for a conspiracy of imported agitators, it is at least more colourful to follow a tale that surfaces in the oral accounts collected by Audrey Johnson, and which reappears in Macintyre's text as a description of some of the 'desperate types' who were attracted to the Workers' Defence Corps.[40] Johnson gives the name of this 'branch' of the WDC as 'the Irish Brigade', noting that they 'added the fruits of a long tradition of enmity to British authority to working class dislike of the police'.

> Following the rough treatment received in several eviction demonstrations they began to collect arms; revolvers were all they could get until someone brought some gelignite up from the south coast mines...Pickets were still fortifying the Bankstown house they had occupied, and the Irish Brigade were preparing was preparing to bring in its arms, when the police unexpectedly attacked, several days before the eviction notice became legally operative.[41]

It is true that at this time in Sydney there was a wild bunch of boyos who liked to boast about the policemen whom they had shot back in the Troubles, as well as naming the coppers and others whom they planned to murder next Saturday night. Through the first six months of 1931 the frequent meetings of these men were attended by an undercover probationary constable, who reported their schemes to Constables Cook and Neville (key players in the Clovelly Frame Up) and to Sergeant Coombes, who in turn passed the paperwork up the police hierarchy until it eventually reached the Commissioner. This spying operation was initially intended to cover the Workers' Defence Army (sic), and the reports continued to be headed 'Irish Terrorists, Workers Defence Army etc', though from the first memorandum onwards it is clear that the young policeman was mostly concerned with the 'Irish' group.[42]

The meetings of these 'Irish Terrorists' were attended by about six to eight regulars, with occasional visitors. At the time the file was opened in late January 1931 the main players were sharing a house in Surry Hills with Dave Williams, one of the organisers of the Workers' Defence Corps. However, it would quickly become clear that only a few of the men attended WDC meetings, and their aim was to recruit 'the intelligent portion' of the WDC to their own organisation. By the time of the second report – in mid February – the group's 'headquarters' was in Redfern and towards the end of June they were meeting in Annandale. The second report notes that 'Those who are members of the Communist Party do not believe in the propaganda of that party'. Indeed, these men saw themselves as being in competition with the CPA. Their own aim was 'to form a workers' army to overthrow capitalism and install a republic' and they resolved that 'all money stolen or obtained in any manner was to be kept for the purpose of supporting the members of the organisation, and not to be handed to the Communist Party, and nor were they to be informed of the activities of this organisation'. They felt that 'they had been let down by the Communist Party in their previous attempts to do work' and complained that the Party was 'against' a number of them. They feared that the

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Party would 'denounce them to the police'. As well as this quasi-political purpose, the group's aim was to pay off old scores. Thus 'They state their object is to murder all persons in authority who have been in any way mixed with them and have turned on them'. Over the months, the hit list would include Jock Garden, Jack Lang, the Trades Hall guards Cable and Kelly, and the infamous Constable Cook and Sergeant Coombes. The men claimed 'that they have means of disposing of bodies which will never be detected. They consider that this class of action would be the proper one to bring about a revolution'.

From the beginning, some of the individuals boasted of knowing how to get a stockpile of weapons. But there always seemed to be some sort of hitch. For example, on 28 May there was talk of raiding a military dump containing 150 rifles and eight submachine guns, but on 4 June the men realised that they would first need to buy a lorry, to transport the weapons, and they didn't have any money. Of course once they *had* the rifles, 'it would be no trouble to hold up a bank at any time'. There was also talk of knowing how to get explosives from somewhere near Newcastle, but they never followed this through either. On a couple of occasions, a member would actually produce a weapon; one man had a revolver and pistol as well as a short Lee Enfield Service Rifle. When the police traced the rifle, it was found to have been issued 'to the AIF Reinforcements proceeding overseas on the 9th February 1915'. Clearly, this gun had gone to Gallipoli!

Yet perhaps the most extraordinary thing to emerge from these extremely detailed reports is that none of the men – either the regular group or the occasional visitors – ever mentioned attending any of the four eviction battles. Nor do the names of any of the men ever turn up in the lists of those arrested in anti-eviction protests (or indeed in other unemployed demonstrations). In early March a few men, said to be members of the WDC and CPA, showed off some water pistols and bottles of ammonia which they implied were connected with a 'recent proposed eviction' in Chapel Street Woolloomooloo; they planned to take them to the march for International Unemployed Day, on 6 March. But this rally took place without incident.[43] Despite the fact that for a couple of months the group's headquarters was in Redfern, there was no mention of the eviction in that suburb. By the time of the Leichhardt eviction, the group was meeting in the adjoining suburb of Annandale, but they evidently didn't go along. Three nights later, four of the men decided 'to burn down' the house 'from where the people were evicted'; this was to happen on Friday 12, 'late at night', when the new tenants were in bed. But 'the threat to burn down the house was not carried out'.

The other crazy feature of these reports is that it is clear that the police force was far more concerned with this group than it was with the WDC or indeed with the anti-eviction movement. Though reference to the Workers' Defence Army remained at the top of each file, there was rarely mention of this organisation. Occasionally, there would be a throwaway line at the end of a report, noting that 'Nothing of any consequence has taken place with the Workers' Defence Army'. On 26 May – four days before the police broke into the Redfern house – the young probationary constable reported:

> The Workers' Defence Army are at present engaged dealing with eviction matters in the different suburbs, and have stated that they are desirous of getting young Police sent there when they are protecting a house so as they can annoy them and probably cause an arrest to be made. Then they will illtreat the Policeman concerned. They have said that old Police cannot be trapped in this manner.

Does this support some sort of idea that police were being lured into houses? It sounds more like a joke. In fact, the WDC wasn't protecting the Redfern house on 30 May because it was holding its 'annual meeting' in the city. But the

organisation no doubt did stage the rescue attempt which took place half an hour afterwards – in which 30 men and women arrived in a truck and tried to load up the tenant's furniture.[44] Police drew guns again, and it was in the resulting melee that Noel Eatock and his two companions were arrested. Yet on 1 June the spy laconically noted that 'Nothing important has transpired with the Workers Defence Army. They are still attending to eviction matters'. Perhaps something can be discerned from a subsequent report of the WDC conference, in which it was noted that 'The business at the present time is left in the hands of the Central Executive'. Perhaps this does point to the secret string-pulling role of the Party hierarchy and H. M. Wicks. A few days later, on 9 June, the spy would note that 'The Workers Defence Army is being re-organised and branches formed in every suburb'. But he added: 'Nothing of importance has taken place recently other than the picketing of houses (eviction matters).' And on 15 June – two days before the police stormed the Bankstown house – Sergeant Coombes merely advised his superiors that 'The Workers Defence Corps is still engaged in picketing houses in the different suburbs – eviction cases.'

And what of the story that the Irish Brigade was preparing to give arms and explosives to the Bankstown Boys, but was forestalled when the police literally jumped the gun?[45] On the night of Wednesday 17 June – the day on which police had fired at pickets inside the Bankstown house, and captured 16 bleeding and battered prisoners – the Irish Terrorists apparently did not comment on the day's events. Rather, they 'practically decided… to rob a bookmaker's house on Saturday night', but put off the actual 'arrangements' for another meeting. Passing on this information to his superiors, Sergeant Coombes added that 'The Workers Defence Corps are still engaged picketing houses in the different suburbs, and are arming themselves with clubs and iron bars for the purpose of fighting the police'. No mention of other weapons!

At this point, the file abruptly ends.[46] But there is yet another story, that after the Bankstown battle was over, one of the Irish Brigade gave a gun to WDC leader, Mick Ryan, who – discovering it to be a police gun, and assuming the owner to be an informer and agent provocateur – arranged for the confiscation of all the weapons of the Irish group; the guns were supposedly thrown into White Bay.[47] This tale seems to connect with a story about an undercover policeman who 'suggested the Party take reprisals for police shootings at Bankstown by mining another house at Guildford with explosives'. The Party naturally expelled him.[48] It is quite possible that the police were trying to raise the stakes in the anti-eviction game. But if so – it was to no avail.

So was there nothing at Bankstown more dangerous than bricks or lengths of lead pipe? In the records of the Closed Session of the CPA's Central Committee Plenum, held the next January, some words have been censored in a tantalising fashion. Evidently at the time of the Bankstown campaign the Party had been informed that 1000 returned soldiers in the neighbourhood 'were so incensed that they were prepared to offer [censored] resistance'. But though some Party officials may have wanted to 'dramatise the situation' with a bit of armed struggle, the point is that nothing happened: 16 pickets were left to hold the fort. Beris Penrose comments that

> As divisions among defenders developed over the best tactics to employ, it appears that one communist leader ordered the removal of the weapon/weapons from the house. Although, as Moxon said, it was 'never discovered who ordered [censored] to be taken out of the house at Bankstown'.[49]

Nor, it might be added, was there any indication as to who had ordered anything to be put *into* the house – if indeed it ever was. But should it be a surprise if a gun had been present? Once the police drew revolvers, it would perhaps be more

surprising if someone didn't consider playing tit for tat. As well as having war souvenirs, some unemployed had rifles for shooting game.[50] But the real point of all this is that – despite opportunities – no guns were ever used by the anti-evictionists, and no guns were ever found in the houses when the police ransacked them after the battles. Surely a significant reason for this lack of armed retaliation was that, at heart, the anti-eviction movement was a community movement. Out there in the street were neighbours, including woman and children. An innocent bystander might get hurt.

Though occupying a house provided a useful focal point for a range of political activity, the tactic worked overall because of the gatherings of people outside, rather than the actual occupations. The crowd is the most significant thing in these struggles.

At Leichhardt, there was a crowd of 200 supporters – women as well as men. In the face of the police baton charge, some 'stood firm and gave attack for attack' before being scattered down the steep street.[51] At Bankstown, on the other hand, though 'the surrounding streets were crowded', the wide paddocks around the house meant that the crowd never had the same sense of purpose. After hearing the gunshots people stayed at 'a safe distance'. There were even some 'free fights' between onlookers.[52] But Newtown was proof of support for the movement. In the long narrow street which hooks between the major thoroughfares of Erskineville Road and King Street, there gathered 'a crowd hostile to the police, numbering many thousand'.

> They filled the street for a quarter of a mile on each side of the building until squads of police drove them back about 200 yards, and police cordons were thrown across the roadway. At times the huge crowd threatened to get out of hand. It was definitely hostile to the police. When constables emerged from the back of the building with their faces covered in blood, the crowd hooted and shouted insulting remarks. When one patrol wagon containing prisoners was being driven away, people standing well back in the crowd hurled stones at the police driver.[53]

Extraordinary though this report is, it must be realised that as the crowd put up this determined show, the police were patrolling them with drawn pistols and batons. Just a few minutes earlier, these people had witnessed the police jump out of a bus and commence firing on the eviction house, and the sound of gunfire and screaming was continuing to come from inside the house.

So who were these resistant people in Union Street Newtown? Were they Communist stooges? Hardly. In Sydney at this time the CPA had at most 600 members – many of them (Wicks admitted) 'on paper only'.[54] This is where Greenland's interpretation misses the point. These people were Labor voters, and probably quite a few were ALP members. It was the involvement of great numbers of working class people in mass rallies around the houses that forced Lang to realise that he would have to change the law to satisfy his own voters.

On the day of the Newtown battle, the NSW Labor Caucus called for an amendment to the Fair Rents Act 'without delay', and for legislation to protect the unemployed against eviction.[55] The next day, Jock Garden opened his pre-selection candidature for the seat of Cook by promising that there would be no more evictions and that the government would soon introduce anti-eviction legislation.[56] A week later, the NSW Attorney General put before parliament the Fair Rents and Lessees Relief Bill.[57] Though this was withdrawn, in early August the government brought in the Ejectments Postponements Legislation,[58] followed by the Reduction of Rents Act in October.[59] These two bills did not solve the problem – for the unemployed still had no cash with which to pay their rent – but they did provide a considerable amelioration.

Overall, the houses at Bankstown and Newtown were

defended at a terrible cost to the 34 pickets. All the men were mercilessly beaten, some were shot at by police, and 16 would be given gaol sentences of up to 18 months. How miserable it must have been to find that within a month of the final battle, they were being rapped over the knuckles by their own organisation. Now the UWM Executive complained that at Bankstown and Newtown the anti-eviction campaign had 'degenerated from mass work to conspiratorial work'. The correct method was to 'mobilise the mass of the workers in the neighbourhood in support of the tenant'.[60]

At heart, the story of this campaign raises the unanswerable question about the correct balance between the role of the masses and the role of the revolutionary vanguard. Certainly, the anti-eviction campaign was successful because it was an expression of wide community feeling. But would this community feeling have developed if the pickets hadn't occupied the houses?

Endnotes

1   *The Sun*, 29/6/31, p. 7

2   Iona and Peter Opie, *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), p 2.

3   Nadia Wheatley, 'Meeting Them at the Door: Radicalism, Militancy and the Sydney Anti-Eviction Campaign of 1931', in Jill Roe ed., *Twentieth Century Sydney* (Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 1980) pp. 208-230

4   cf. Stuart Macintyre, *The Reds* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1998) pp 170-171

5   To the Departments and Nuclei of No (?) District. (Title of pamphlet partly obliterated). n.d. From the evidence of organisations named, must by 1930 or 1931.

6   This claim made by Herbert Moore, *Workers' Weekly (WW)*, 8/8/30, p. 2 apopros of the platform adopted at the July 1930 UWM Conference.

7   This was a specific localised protest which developed when police began to supervise distribution at the south coast ration depots – which had formerly been in the hands of local citizens and unemployed. The initiative for declaring the dole 'black' came from local UWM branches, and with crowds of up to 600 or 800 in different centres, it is clear that the main activists were local. Militants included some WDC members from the shanty camps. cf *Sun* 11/5/31 p. 1; 12/5/31, p.1; 15/1/31, p. 10; *SMH*, 12/5/31, p. 9; 13/5/11, p. 11. *WW* 15/1/31, p.1. According to police spies, a few Sydney members of the WDC went down to the south coast at this time. Police Special Bundle Papers regarding Irish Terrorists, Workers Defence Corps etc (10/1829), 18/5/31

8   *WW* 1/8/30, p. 6

9   108 credentialled delegates attended, representing 25 NSW branches of the UWM; NSW Labor Council; the Building Trades Group of Labor Council; certain unions such as the ARU, the AEU, the Painters' Union (sic) and the Seamens' Union; a few ALP branches. Also present were 62 Hunger Marchers (from Lithgow, the South Coast and Cessnock) who had arrived on Friday 25 July, after several days on the road. There were also a number of women present. *WW* 1/8/30, p. 6. *The Working Woman*, 15/8/30, p. 2

10 The proactive role of the police would emerge in the inquiry into the Clovelly case.

11 For Clovelly story cf *SMH* 29/7/30, p. 9; 13/8/30 p. 10; 20/8/30, p. 16; 11/9/30, p. 7 Re the police spies' brief to pick out militants, cf court evidence given by Cook and Neville, *SMH*, 20/8/30; 8/1/31. For the November court case cf *WW*, 28/11/30, p. 1.; 1'2/12/30, p. 1; 19/12/30, p. 1 It was Communist Party policy to refuse good behaviour bonds, and this rule was strictly enforced.

12   cf *SMH* 1/1/31; 6/1/31, p. 9; 7/1/31, p. 9; 8/1/31, p. 4; *WW* 16/1/31, p. 6 Sylvester had two alibi witnesses, who had

been unable to appear at the initial trial. The other man released was Wilfred Mountjoy. Hall Greenland notes that as 'revenge' for Sylvester's 'reprieve', a carload of detectives chased him, bashed him severely and arrested him three weeks later. The charges were later dropped. cf Greenland, *Red Hot* (Sydney, Wellington Lane Press, 1998) p. 25

13 *WW* 23/1/31, p. 1

14 cf. Hall Greenland, *op. cit.,* p. 25

15 After the Glebe Dole Riot of October 1932, the developing rift in the CPA would split wide open over the matter of organising the defence for Noel Eatock, brother of one of the Bankstown Boys. Sylvester loyalists in the Balmain and Glebe UWMs would join with him in founding the Workers Party of Australia (Left Opposition) – Australia's first Trotskyist party.

16 *WW*, 20/2/31, p. 6; 20/3/31, p. 6. Suburban groups were organised into 11 Districts. In many cases the paper notes the address of premises and meeting times, and often outlines specific protests or mass meetings of suburban groups.

17 According to Stuart Macintyre, the WDC was preceded by the Labour Volunteer Army on the northern coalfields in 1927, and by the Labour Defence Army formed by the NSW Labor Council in January 1930. He notes that the organisation 'was known briefly as the Workers Defence Army before assuming its standard name in mid-1930'. cf. Stuart Macintyre, *op. cit.,* p. 443, Endnote 15. The WDC also seems to have been re-organised or revitalised at the opening of 1931.

18 Distances walked were often 20 miles or more. For example, until the opening of the local relief depot in April 1930, Bankstown unemployed walked to the city to collect relief. Sue Rosen, *Bankstown: A Sense of Identity* (Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 1996), p. 106. Alex Mackaroff, one of the Bankstown Boys, speaks of walking from Bankstown to Surry Hills, to visit an acquaintance. Interview on 'Forever Striking Trouble', *Hindsight*, ABC Radio National, 7/3/99.

19 *Smith's Weekly*, 13/6/31, p. 3

20 *WW* 17/1/31, p. 1

21 *WW* 24/4/31, p. 2

22 *SMH*, 9/4/31, p. 10; 14/4/31, p. 11.

23 A fascinating account of picket duty can be found in the statement of Robert Brechin, on duty at Glebe when the police broke in on 29/6/31. cf Brechin and Gee vs Police, C. Jollie Smith & Co, *Notes on Cases for ICWPA*, Thorne Papers (ANU) '

24 *WW* 6/3/31, p. 6; 20/3/31, p. 6

25 *SMH* 2/5/31, p. 15; *WW* 8/5/31, p. 4; 22/5/31, p. 4

26 *WW* 22/5/31, p. 4

27 SMH 1/6/31, p. 10. The Redfern case the first eviction 'successfully carried out in spite of the efforts of the UWM'.

28 *WW* 31/7/31, p. 4; 28/8/31, p. 4.

29 *NSW Parliamentary Debates (NSWPD)*,vol 126, 2/6/31, pp. 3057-3958.

30 The landlady of the Bankstown property would explain that she had been told that it was suddenly necessary for evictions to be enforced, or some sort of legal precedent would be set, and 'the real estate companies would all lose a fortune'. She implied that she had been pressured into taking action. 'Mrs Mac', Interview with Nadia Wheatley, 1979. (She did not wish her full name to be used.)

31 In March 1931 the non-Communist Unemployed Workers Organisation and the NSW Rentpayers Association were complaining to Lang about the magistrates lack of 'solicitude or generosity as far as evictions of unemployed workers were concerned'. Hilary Golder, High and Responsible Office, A History of NSW Magistracy (Sydney: Sydney University Press) p. 159

32 Stuart Macintyre, *op. cit.,* p. 193 and footnote 14, p. 441

33 Hall Greenland, *op. cit.,* p. 26

34 According to the tenant's wife, who was inside the house at the time. *Labor Daily*, 2/6/31, p. 5

35 She would even support Jock Garden's faction against motions put up by Communists at Labor Council. cf *Minutes of the Sydney Trades and Labor Council*, 28/5/31; 4/6/31. cf *Working Woman*, 1/10/31, p. 4 for Mrs Eatock's statement on leaving the ALP for the CPA.

36 Apart from their habit of walking about, the unemployed frequently moved house, from suburb to suburb, because of the rental crisis. Someone might have neighbourhood links in a number of suburbs.

37 Alexander Mackaroff, Interview, 'Forever Striking Trouble', ABC Radio National, 7/3/99.

38 John Parsons of Bankstown should not be confused with the police spy who operated under the name Parsons, and who was unmasked after the Bankstown battle. (cf Stuart Macintyre, *op. cit.*, p.218). From the file on 'Irish Terrorists, Workers' Defence Corps etc' (4/6/31) it is clear that the WDC members included Parsons (City) as well as Parsons (Bankstown).

39 Hall Greenland, *op cit*, p. 42. No date suggested for when this happened, but it was clearly before the October 1932 split.

40 Stuart Macintyre, *op. cit.*, p. 211

41 Audrey Johnson, *Bread & Roses* (Melbourne: Left Book Club, 1990) p. 39

42 This and subsequent account taken from Police Special Bundle Papers regarding Irish Terrorists, Workers Defence Corps etc, 1931 (10/1829), NSW State Records Authority, various dates. We don't reveal the names from these reports, because even the dead should not be defamed by secret police files.

43 *SMH* 7/3/31, p. 15

44 *SMH* 1/6/31, p. 10

45 The police did not wait for the execution date of the eviction warrant – June 18 – but came a day earlier. The pickets were taken by surprise. cf Court evidence, *SMH*, 12/11/p. 6; 13/11/31, p. 6

46 This last page and its carbon are loose; a hole at the top suggests they were once attached to a bundle of subsequent papers. There may be some sinister reason for the apparent loss of this material, but as far the anti-eviction movement is concerned, it is clear that the action was all over.

47 Audrey Johnson, *op. cit.*, p. 40

48 Stuart Macintyre, *op. cit.,* p. 218

49 Beris Gene Penrose, 'The Communist Party and Trade Union Work in Queensland in the Third Period: 1928-1935', PhD thesis, University of Queensland, 1993, pl. 163-164. Reference to Closed Session also quoted from Penrose.

50 Even in Balmain, Albert Robbie and Danny Carlin and 'some of the others' used to go out with a gun if they 'needed anything for the UWM Hostel, or for ourselves'. They often came home with a duck – 'or even two'. Albert Robbie, Interview with Nadia Wheatley, 1970.

51 *The Sun* 5/6/31, p. 1; *Labor Daily,* 6/6/31, p. 1

52 *The Sun* 17/6/31, p. *SMH*, 18/6/31, p. 9

53 *SMH* 20/6/31, p. 13

54 As Macintyre notes, it is hard to put an exact figure on membership. However, in June 1931, the membership of Number 1 District of the CPA (Sydney and NSW country, excluding Broken Hill and Newcastle) was given as 675. WW 27/11/31, p. 2 Macintyre, *op. cit.*, p. 179, gives a figure of 2021 for the whole membership in July 1931, but endorses Wicks's cautionary comment.

55 *SMH*, 20/6/31, p. 13

56 *SMH*, 22/6/31, p. 9

57 *NSWPD*, vol. 127, 26/6/31, p. 3656;

58 *NSWPD,* Vol 128, 21/7/31, p. 4461; 4/8/31, p. 4973

59 *NSWPD*, vol. 130, 29/9/31, p. 6833-6851; 24/11/31, p. 7041

60 *WW* 31/7/31, p. 4: Annual Conference of the UWM.

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