

Safety First: The 1934 Ingham Weil's Disease Strike

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Abstract

Summary of Argument

The Weil's Disease disputes of 1934 and 1935 in North Queensland were seminal health and safety industrial actions in the cane fields. Crowned after sustained struggle and setbacks with success, they generalized the iconic practice of burning standing sugar cane to expunge vermin vectors of a debilitating and sometimes lethal disorder of human internal organs.¹ Victory was the child of superior organization. It saw dissident Australian Workers' Union (AWU) members, many of them immigrant workers, join forces with 'British' workers under the leadership of Anarchist activists and the Communist Party of Australia (CPA). They were assisted by the cooperation of public sector medical professionals.² These industrial actions have been hailed as among the great strikes of Queensland history.³ This paper will retrace the historiography of the 1934 Ingham dispute, which set up the wider 1935 regional confrontation, to discern why the strikes broke out and succeeded with the benefit of wide community support, crossing class, ethnic and gender lines, drawing lessons from the past for today's labour movement organisers. Men and women, people of different or no particular politics, workers and shopkeepers and farmers are known to have been involved, as were Italian, Spanish and Maltese labourers, who brought their revolutionary songs and characteristic foods as contributions to the common cause.

We will also explore the place of probability in historical enquiry as an epistemological adjunct to objective scientific certainty, maintaining the perspective of the early 20th century dialectical historical philosopher Robin George Collingwood.⁴ These methodological insights will be employed in searching after the likely role in the strikes of the seminal Italian Australian Anarchist activist Francesco Giovanni Fantin (1901-42).⁵ As Fantin was a dissident rank and file Italian Anarcho-syndicalist member of the AWU, contradictions in this union's role in the disputes under the leadership of Clarrie Fallon, dating from the prior Gentlemen's Agreement which brought in the racist, exclusionary labour practice of 'British Preference', will be examined in the light of the concept of 'the racial hierarchy of labour'.⁶

Summary of Findings

The paper will be based on and depart from the classic 1980s studies of Diane Menghetti and Gerardo Papalia,⁷ to address these and other heuristic queries, with a view to identifying more closely the historical significance of the 1934 Ingham district dispute. Furthermore, it will address the implications of the 1934 strike for the 1935 regional health and safety dispute around Weil's Disease. Seminal for these fresh enquiries will be Douglass's historical social anthropology study in multicultural migration, *From Italy to Ingham*.⁸ Contemporaneously, it will analyse the roles of Forgan Smith and Cilento in respect of both industrial actions. The role of Jean Devanny, the CPA feminist novelist and organiser of the Movement Against War and Fascism, active on the Sugar Coast during the relevant period, will be documented from reinterpreted known and new sources, including her brilliant, social realist 1936 'really proletarian novel', *Sugar Heaven*.⁹ The effort in the Italian community of Australia's only Communist parliamentarian Fred Paterson, who thought it amongst his best political and

legal work, will inform the analysis on the basis of his biography *The People's Champion* by Ross Fitzgerald¹⁰ and my prior unpublished research relating to him.

The region's unique relation in Australia to the political watershed of the era, the Spanish Civil War, which immediately followed the strikes, will be taken into account with reference to its backstory in the history of Spanish political migration to the region, which took place prior to and during the strikes, as recorded in the anthropological history, *Spanish Anarchists in Northern Queensland*.¹¹ The figure of Frank Fantin, for example, demonstrates the connection of Republican Antifascist Loyalty and the strikes, known from oral tradition and Italian secret police papers on the émigré diaspora in North Queensland. These broad bases will provide a solid foundation for the study of the strikes, deemed classical at the time by the CPA, as community-based strikes.

Finally, these strikes as successful industrial actions carried out in the sluggish recovery years of the Great Depression, will be demonstrated to be important and practical precedents in today's Neo-liberal Great Recession under the restraints on the right to strike of today, currently mandated as the restrictive confines of 'Protected Industrial Actions'.¹² Community based strikes, it will be argued, are tailor-made to ease and circumvent those restrictions, arguably offering unions a little slack with respect to picketing and otherwise assisting to sustain industrial actions. The paper will be presented also to a Sydney union forum, being negotiated by union organizer Alexander North as a historical theory moment, orientated to contemporary industrial challenges and practices.

¹ Diane Menghetti 'The Weil's Disease Strike 1935' in Dennis Murphy *The Big Strikes: Queensland 1889-1965*, (St Lucia: UQP 1983).

² Gordon Morrissey, 'The occurrence of leptospirosis (Weil's Disease) in Australia', *Medical Journal of Australia* October 13 1934; Cotter & Sawyers, 'A laboratory & epistemological investigation of an outbreak of Weil's Disease in Northern Queensland', *MJA* November 10 1934.

³ Menghetti cit.

⁴ See RG Collingwood, *An Autobiography* (Oxford: OUP 1939); *The Idea of History* (Oxford: OUP 1946); *The Principles of History* (Oxford: OUP 1999). See also the reasonable biography by Fred Inglis, *History Man: The Life of RG Collingwood* (Princeton: PUP 2009), although it fails to acknowledge that Collingwood's democratic tendencies matured into transformative Social Democracy in his last, Antifascist phase in the late 1930s. After all, Collingwood enjoined due historical care in positively superseding war and capitalism in the conclusion to *The Idea of History*. Collingwood was hailed by Oxford historiographer EH Carr, no less, as the major 20th century British philosopher of history (London: Penguin 19??) p?

⁵ See my 'FG Fantin: A Legacy Retrieved', in *Journal of the Historical Society of South Australia No.44 2016*.

⁶ Jude Elton, '

⁷ Menghetti in Murphy, cit.; Gerardo Papalia et al *Peasant Rebels in the Canefields: Italian Migrant Involvement in the 1934 & 1935 Weil's Disease Cane Cutters Strikes in Queensland* (Melbourne: Catholic Intercultural Resource Centre, Paper 37 1985).

⁸ William A Douglass, *From Italy to Ingham: Italians in North Queensland*, (St Lucia: UQP 1995).

⁹ Jean Devanny, *Sugar Heaven*, (1936); 2nd edition (Vulgar Press 2002).

¹⁰ Ross Fitzgerald, *The People's Champion, Fred Paterson* (St Lucia: UQP 1997).

¹¹ *The Spanish Anarchists of Northern Australia: Revolution in the Sugar Cane Fields* (Chicago: Chicago University Press 2019).

¹² *The Fair Work Act* (Canberra: The Commonwealth of Australia 2009); See Part 3, Division 4: §346 Industrial Activities p421: Protection.