



Carlton Community History Group

NEWSLETTER

Issue No. 7

November 2017

The Anti-Conscription Campaign of 1917

Conscription, the compulsory enlistment of men for military service, particularly for overseas service, was a contentious issue in Australia during the First World War. In 1916 and 1917, two bitter and divisive referenda were conducted on this issue - and December this year marks the centenary of the second and final referendum.

Australian troops fighting overseas in the First World War enlisted voluntarily. In the early stages, this provided enough men to support Australia's war effort. But as the enormity of casualties on the Western Front became known in Australia and no quick end to the war seemed likely, the number of men volunteering fell. There was sustained pressure from the British Government to ensure that the Australian divisions were not depleted. But recruiting campaigns in Australia were not achieving the required targets.

The Prime Minister, William ('Billy') Hughes then decided to ask the electorate in a referendum if they would agree to men undergoing compulsory training being required to serve overseas. The referendum stimulated bitter and divisive argument. Divisions were particularly along class and religious lines. The labour unions were generally opposed as was the Catholic church. The referendum was held on 28 October 1916 and resulted in a defeat for the proposition, with 1,087,557 votes for and 1,160,033 against.

But 'Billy' Hughes was not finished yet. On 20 December 1917 a modified proposal was put to Australian voters. The government's 'scheme' was to conscript only enough men to make up a total of 7,000 a month, confined to single men, widowers, and divorcees without dependents. The campaign was bitter, and arguments again split communities. The proposal was again rejected, by a larger majority than before, with 1,015,159 in favour and 1,181,747 against. The decisive defeat of the second referendum closed the issue of conscription for the remainder of the war.

Two similar posters with opposing messages.



Images courtesy State Library of Victoria

Interested in local history?
Then come and join us and help preserve our past for the future.

Carlton Community History Group

Dates and topics of forthcoming meetings are posted on our website.
Monthly meetings are generally on a Monday evening at 7.30pm in the
Carlton Library, Rathdowne Street, North Carlton

Carlton Community History Group,
P.O. Box 148, Carlton North, 3054.

Email: carlton@cchq.asn.au

Website: www.cchq.asn.au

News from other organizations

Remembering the Anti-Conscription Campaign

In 2016 the Brunswick Coburg Anti-Conscription Commemoration Campaign was formed to record, remember and commemorate the successful anti-conscription campaigns of 1916 and 1917, when Brunswick and Coburg residents voted overwhelmingly “No” in the two referenda. The activities of the group have included:

- Meetings and forums to present and discuss our history
- Helping schools with local resources for their WW1 studies
- Developing walking tours around significant sites and buildings
- Research and publication of booklet with history and resources
- A website with key information and links

For more details, contact the group at anticonscription1916@gmail.com

RHSV exhibition – ‘Standing on the Corner’

This exhibition, in the Royal Historical Society of Victoria’s gallery at 239 A’Beckett Street in the city, illustrates how Melbourne’s corners have been used across 110 years and shows well-known corners as they once were. To provide context, a variety of maps of Melbourne for the period 1850 till 1960 are also displayed. The exhibition runs until 20 December.

History of North Fitzroy

Over recent months members of the Fitzroy History Society have been compiling information on aspects of the history of North Fitzroy. This work will culminate in the publication of a booklet and a public presentation. The date of this presentation is Sunday 3 December, 2.00pm at the new North Fitzroy Library at the corner of St Georges Road and Best Street, North Fitzroy.

Fitzroy Oral History Project

The Fitzroy History Society’s oral history project, under the title *The Life and Times of Fitzroy from the 1950s* was launched on 17 August last at the Fitzroy Library. This was the culmination of over two years work by a panel of nine interviewers. As well as sponsoring the launch, the City of Yarra had produced a video recording of some of the stories, and one of them was screened at the launch. The interview panel produced a total of 23 audio tapes with transcripts for the Local History Collection of the City of Yarra Library. The interviews are available via a link on the Fitzroy History Society website, or at <http://oralhistory.fitzroyhistorysociety.org.au>

A tumultuous meeting in Carlton

The following article appeared in The Age newspaper on Tuesday 4 December 1917 under the heading 'ANTI TACTICS AT CARLTON. A TUMULTUOUS MEETING':

The Carlton and North Carlton branches of the National Federation called a public meeting at Carlton Hall, Princes-street, for last evening, in order to assist the conscription campaign. Mr. Story MP and Mr. Arthur Kelly were to address the audience in advocacy of the Government's scheme. The hall, however, was principally crowded with anti-conscriptionists and for nearly two hours the chairman (Alderman J. Gardiner) and the other speakers strove to make themselves heard above a pandemonium of hooting, groaning, shrieking, singing, counting-out, cat-calling, barking and whistling. The 'audience' consisted principally of young women and young men.

The appearance of the Alderman and the speakers on the platform was the signal for some applause and louder groaning. The chairman asked the audience to rise and sing the National Anthem. About half of the audience rose and sang the National Anthem, but the remainder broke in with a Socialist song. The Chairman appealed for a fair hearing from Carlton residents for the speakers and was



A large meeting in support of the No Campaign in the Exhibition Building in Carlton. (Photo courtesy State Library of Victoria)

greeted immediately with shouts of 'What about the Town Hall' (Some cheers and laughter). Mr Story then attempted to explain the Government's scheme. Immediately the hall echoed with stamping, groaning and shrill chanting, which continued without cessation until the end of the meeting. At first Mr. Story could be heard at intervals. He pointed to the peril in which the country stood, the need of reinforcements, and the moderation of the Government's proposals. Those who argued that the voluntary system was adequate, he said, would have the opportunity of proving this under the reinforcement scheme. He denied that the scheme involved industrial conscription.

At once the uproar drowned his voice. A storm of questions broke against him. 'What about the Prime Minister's promise?' shouted one man. The women leading the chorus took up an adapted version of 'Australia Will Be There', ending with a line 'Australia will be free'. 'Not if we lose this war' cried the speaker. The storm went on. The chairman hurried down and summoned two constables to the middle of the hall. One man was ejected. The uproar was now deafening. The hall was now packed to the very doors. A young woman moving from bench to bench distributed anti-conscription leaflets. One woman raised a white pocket handkerchief from the end of her umbrella. 'The white flag' called a voice, and soon handkerchiefs were waving. Mr. Story, holding to his task, proceeded to the end of his speech. "Vote Yes ! Yes! Yes!" he cried; and 'No' roared the crowd.

Other speakers following were as audible as the figures on a film. More police were summoned. The chairman was seen gesticulating from the platform - a young man jumping on to a seat was promptly pulled down. Finally the chairman called for cheers, and the police slowly cleared the hall.

Newspaper supported a Yes vote

In Melbourne different newspapers took different positions on the referenda. The Age was among those who supported conscription and urged its readers to vote Yes. One of the methods it used was to publish letters from soldiers at the front who supported conscription. The following article which appeared in The Age on 30 July 1917 features excerpts from a letter from a Carlton man to his wife:

ANXIETY AT THE FRONT.

It is not, perhaps, generally realized how seriously the men at the front are viewing the falling away of enlistments in Australia. To them it is a matter of the gravest importance. A plentiful supply of reinforcements was guaranteed them by Mr. Fisher, who, as Prime Minister, declared that Australia was in the war to the 'last man and the last shilling' but they are growing anxious as weeks and months go by bringing no sign

of increased enrolments. What an insufficiency of reinforcements means to the men in the trenches is strikingly portrayed in a letter which has been received by Mrs. Conway, 211 Drummond-street, Carlton, from her husband, Corporal F. Conway, who is serving in France. 'I notice', he writes, 'that the recruiting figures show extraordinary slackness. When are they going to wake up? It means for those of us who are left to carry on that instead of short spells in the line, followed by a rest, we shall be compelled to perform long periods of weary, nerve-wracking work, with very rare reliefs. ... I love Australia, and it hurts me to think that there are men out there who will not help us to fight over here'.



The railway station in the park

In a park in North Carlton sits an unusual building that looks like a nineteenth century railway station. This is in fact what it originally was – the North Carlton railway station on the now defunct Inner Circle railway line.

The park in which it sits was in the 1970s the scene of a bitter struggle between local residents who wanted to retain the by now unused railway land as a park, and a developer who wanted to put a warehouse on it. In the 1980s, local groups were able to turn what was by then a derelict railway station into a vibrant Neighbourhood House, which is what it is today.

A book and DVD that bring together these three stories is now available from

North Carlton Railway Neighbourhood House,
20 Solly Ave, Princes Hill. Phone 9380-6654.
Email admin@railwayneighbourhoodhouse.org.au

The book '**Railway House**' costs \$8, and the DVD '**The Railway Station in the Park**' costs \$18. Postage and handling is extra, or you can pick them up from the neighbourhood house.



Trades Hall in Lygon Street, Carlton, was a centre for the No Campaign. The photo shows it festooned with campaign banners. (Photo courtesy State Library of Victoria)

Carlton during the 1917 referendum

Wounded returned man commits suicide

The Argus newspaper of 24 April 1917 carried the following story under the heading 'Soldier Found Dead. Dreaded Amputation of Leg':

Harry Gwydir Aldridge, aged 32, a returned soldier, was found in bed in his residence in Carlton yesterday with a bullet wound in the chest and a revolver clasped in his right hand. He died this morning. Aldridge had been wounded at Gallipoli, where he received severe wounds in the left knee. His leg began to wither recently causing Aldridge to worry. When the doctors told him that the leg must be amputated he became very depressed.

Bowling club pressured men to enlist

Many organisations felt it necessary for those at home to show their respect for the men who were fighting. At its annual meeting, the Victorian Bowling Club agreed unanimously to a motion by a member of the Carlton club that 'it is undesirable, in the interests of the game, for any man eligible for the Australian Infantry Force to take part therein, and resolves that clubs belonging to the V.B.A. be requested not to select such men to take part in any association fixture or tournament held under their auspices'. (The Australasian, 22 September 1917, page 26).

Vicar of St Michaels tries to enlist

In February the Reverend C W T Rogers of St Michael's, North Carlton, announced to his congregation that if he was unsuccessful in his second attempt to secure a chaplaincy he would ask the Archbishop to permit him to enlist as a private. (Hamilton Spectator, 27 February 1917, page 3).

Hardship for young woman with baby

While countless families struggled with the news of the death or injury of men at the front, other families were affected in other ways. In March 1917 the minister of the Methodist Church in Lygon Street, Carlton, was awoken at 4.30am by the wails of an abandoned baby about three weeks old. Obviously well cared for, she was left with a feeding bottle, a tin of infant food and a note pinned to her clothing. 'My husband is dying and I am too ill to work. Will you be good to my darling? Perhaps you could get some of your people to adopt her. I am alone in Australia. My brothers are all fighting'. (Geelong Advertiser, 2 March 1917, page 4).

Pro-conscription speech at St Jude's church

The Age of 19 October 1917 carried the following article:

Mr. J. T. Barnes, Nationalist candidate for North Melbourne in the coming State elections, opened his campaign in St. Jude's Hall, Carlton, last night, under the auspices of the North Carlton branch of the National Federation. He said he had only consented to contest this seat under great pressure, and he had come forward because the man who was at present representing the electorate was not a loyal subject of the British Empire. There were many loyal people in the trade

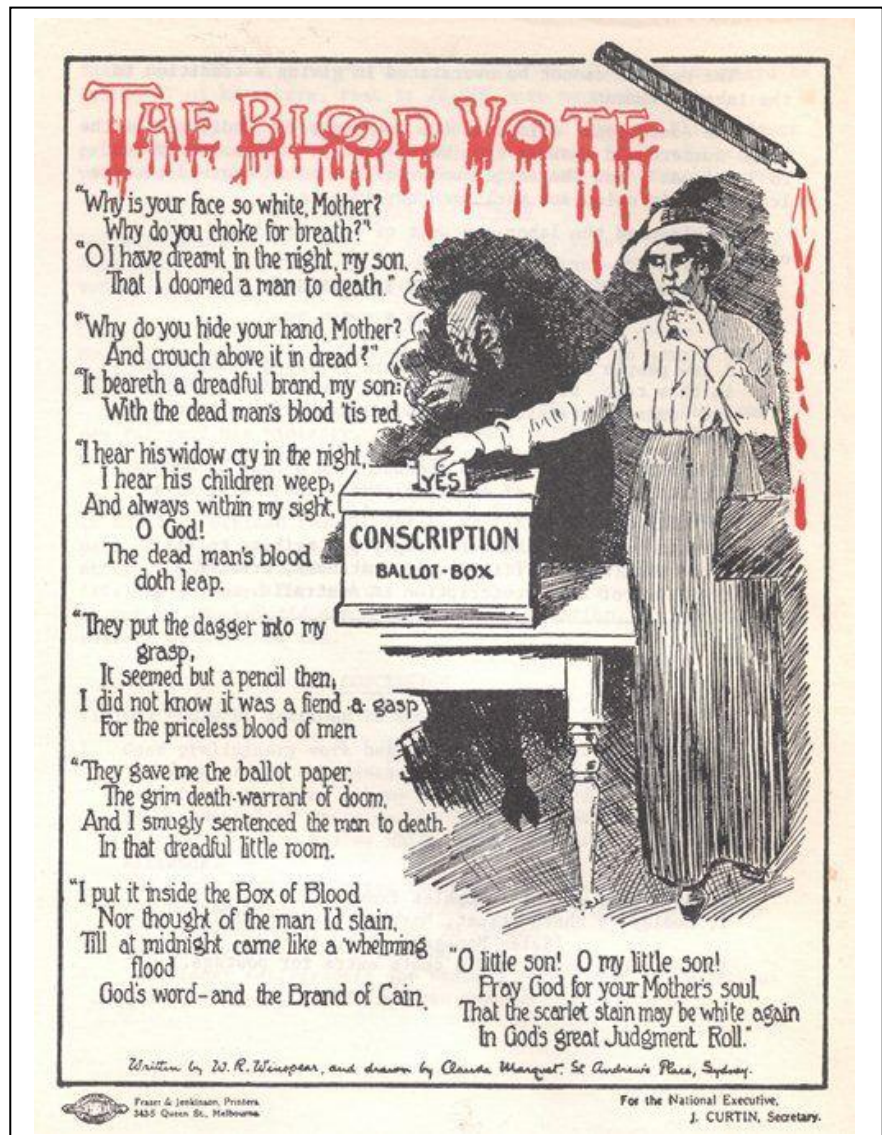
union movement, but instead of loyalty in the official Labor Party there was to be found every form of anarchy and syndicalism. He had broken with the Labor Party on the one issue, and that was conscription. He was still a conscriptionist, and always would be - (cheers) - and he based his thoughts on conscription on the Labor movement. He had always been taught that equality of sacrifice was the only form of democracy which could succeed. Australia was a working man's paradise, but God help Australia if we lost the power and protection of the mother country. The working classes did not know yet that there was a war. The Labor Party's manifesto said they wanted early peace, but if peace were concluded tomorrow Germany would in another few years make another effort to do what she had failed to do now.

Fight in Carlton street over 'Yes' and 'No' arguments

From The Argus, 21 December 1917, page 7:

William Leslie Dunn, aged 20 years, a felt hatter, was charged in the Carlton Court on Thursday, before Messrs. D.E. Hayes (Chairman) and W. Brunton JP with having behaved in an offensive manner on Saturday night last. Sergeant Stallard prosecuted and Mr. W.J. Tucker appeared for the defence. Constable H.G. Hinkley said: At 10 minutes past 11 o'clock last Saturday night there was a mob of about 200 people on the corner of Faraday and Cardigan streets. Accused was prominent among the mob and he started an argument with a man named Hobden, saying to the latter 'I'll have you on' at the same time assuming a fighting attitude. Dunn also acted in a threatening manner, yelling and calling out, also boo-hooing. He was subsequently arrested..... Hobden was a 'Yes' man and Dunn 'No', and it was over this question an argument started. Constable T.D. Morgans gave corroborative evidence. Accused, who said he was a prominent Carlton football player, denied the charge. To Sergeant Stallard - 'I was wearing a "No" button but had no argument in connection with the referendum. The police were telling deliberate falsehoods'.

(Note: William 'Mickey' Dunn played football for Carlton from 1916 till 1919).



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