

The BHP Lockout of 1909: The View from Three Generations of Broken Hill Miners

By BILL O'NEIL (1929-2011)

This is the story as presented by Bill O'Neil of the experiences that he, his father, William Sydney (Shorty) O'Neil, and grandfather, Michael O'Neil went through at Broken Hill, where they observed the industrial relations scene as active unionists who saw their destiny as fighting for the rights of their fellow workers and families, in what was a harsh industrial and physical environment.

The O'Neils - a family of battlers

His grandfather, Michael, and brother Andy O'Neil arrived in the area around Broken Hill as shearers in the 1890's. They both took part in the shearers' strike and on 26th August 1894 participated in the burning of the paddle steamer, *The Rodney*, near Tolarno Station on the Darling River. The steamer was targeted as it was transporting scabs to beat the strike. After this they took part in an attempt to stop scab shearers at Momba Station where Andy O'Neil was arrested. Although acquitted at Broken Hill, he was arrested on another charge for which he was imprisoned for seven years after a trial in Sydney. After his release he was blacklisted as a shearer and travelled to New Zealand.

Meanwhile, Michael arrived at Broken Hill where he was employed as a miner. On 27 July 1903 he became the proud father of William Sidney (Shorty) O'Neil, who in turn fathered the author. These three were to have illustrious careers as staunch unionists and defenders of workers' rights, as did some of their forefathers. Michael and his wife Catherine (nee Beerworth) took part on the picket line in the 1909 lockout at Broken Hill. Her uncle, James McNerney, who had also taken part in the burning of *The Rodney*, was a foundation member of the Shearer's Union of Australasia. Her grandfather, a member of *Sinn Fein*, had been forced to emigrate to South Australia under an assumed name to avoid arrest by British soldiers, so it is not surprising that Catherine herself became a militant unionist and along with her husband passed on her views to her young family, including Shorty.

A few years after the big strike of 1919-20, Michael O'Neil was found to have dust on his lungs. He died a lingering death, his skin hung from his body and he carried around a bucket spitting his lungs up. When the mining companies were making an effort to improve conditions in Broken Hill, he was not convinced of their change of heart. Suspicious of their motives he pointed out that 'There's no good mining company, [it's just that] some are worse than others'. Other quotes from Michael and Shorty passed on and recalled by the author were: 'never forgive and never forget'; 'if someone was a bastard when he was alive he was still a bastard when he was dead'; 'the only reason some people have not scabbed is that they never had the opportunity to do

it'; 'never bow your head to anyone and this includes all Courts, industrial and otherwise'; 'If you don't kick, you get kicked'; and 'if you lie down with dogs, you get up with fleas'. Such indoctrination ensured there were no backsliders among the three generations of O'Neils.

When the British socialist, Tom Mann, arrived in Australia, Shorty was taken to Cockburn to hear him speak during the 1917 sympathy strike.¹ He later became involved with Mann during the strike of 1919-1920 as his shoeshine boy. Mann was practicing his boot-making skills at this time, to make and repair shoes for workers and their families. Shorty left school at 14 years of age and commenced work at BHP just in time to join the 1917 sympathy strike. In 1918 he was made an engine cleaner and became a member of the Federated Engine Driver and Firemens' Association and was the youngest member to go through the 1919-20 strike. As a member of the FED & FA he received 10 shillings a week, which went into the family budget, as his father only received coupon rations available to a family man.

After the 'Big Strike' Shorty returned to BHP but after a couple of weeks, the company shut down for nine-months. Fortunately, being a good footballer, he obtained a job laying railway tracks at Peterborough on the proviso that he agreed to play for the Peterborough Warders [sic]. In 1922 he returned to BHP but when they shut down a year later, he went to work at the North Mine. He then became President of the North Mine Job Committee of the Workers' Industrial Union of Australia (Mining Union) [WIU of A] and in 1952 he became the Check Inspector of that organisation. The following year saw more responsibilities when he became a delegate to the Barrier Industrial Council [BIC]. Subsequently he served as a Trustee to that organisation, and was elevated from Junior to Senior Vice-President. In 1957 he succeeded Bert Kersten to serve as President until 1969. During this time the BIC attained the height of its power and prestige. Shorty died on 24 March 2000, aged 96 years, after a life of service to working class organisations.

The author, William Sidney (Bill) O'Neil, Jnr, born on 16 May 1929, was employed at Zinc Corporation and New Broken Hill Consolidated Mines from 1947 to 1974. However, his career as a miner finished when he received two broken legs in an accident. Subsequently he transferred to the FED & FA as an underground loco driver. During his long and illustrious career, Bill became President of the FED & FA Barrier Branch from 1974-1994; was a Federal Councillor for 20 years; President of the National FED & FA for three years from 1979 and delegate to the ACTU from 1969 to 1993. He was also made a life member of the FED & FA. In addition, he was elected as a delegate to BIC for three years and President from 1985-1995. In 1993 he was presented with the first Mines Inspection Award for 'his personal contribution to the Health and Safety of miners'.

Disputes and strikes

All three generations fought the good fight, and with just cause, for conditions at Broken Hill left much to be desired. In November 1889 the first strike recorded at the 'Hill' took place, being associated with a dispute that came about because of the objection by unionists to working with non-union labour. After only eight days the

companies capitulated, recognised the Amalgamated Miners' Association [AMA] and agreed to collect all dues and pass them to union representatives on payday for each of the various unions. In 1890 an agreement was also signed between the two parties to reduce the hours of work from 48 to 46 hours per week. While it lasted only a few days, the 1889 dispute was not without drama and at one meeting called by the unions, 400 militant women took part, and carried away by the occasion, pursued and tarred and feathered several non-unionists. Showing solidarity with their international brethren, the AMA in the year of the strike cabled £1,000 to England to aid the London Dockers in their fight for the Dockers tanner.²

The 1890 Agreement also set wages at 10 shillings a day for Miners, and eight shillings and four pence per day for Mullockers. However, in 1892 the companies decided to introduce stoping of ore by contract, a move that was strongly opposed by the unions, especially as those on contract were to receive no minimum wage. At a meeting held on 3rd July 1892 some 7,000 miners carried a motion that opposed the proposition and agreed to strike if the companies decided to go ahead with the scheme. The subsequent dispute proved bitter in the extreme and the companies, with the Broken Hill Proprietary being the leading company, were instrumental in approaching the New South Wales Government to send police equipped with rifles and bayonets³ (Figure 1) to keep the strikers under control. Sir Henry Parkes and the first Australian Premier, Edmund Barton (at the time the Attorney general of NSW), at one stage threatened to send in troops if complaints continued about the conduct of strikers at Broken Hill.

Figure 1: *Police at the Barricades, Broken Hill, 1892* [?].



Source: The author

When BHP and other companies brought in workers to man the mines, one thousand police were brought in to protect the 'scabs', with many unionists being arrested. In one incident mounted police, and police with bayonets drawn, arrested

union leaders at a meeting room at the Theatre Royal Hotel, with two leaders Richard Sleath and William Ferguson being put behind bars for two years, Ernest Polkinghorne and Robert Hewitt receiving 18 months, and Herman Hebele nine months. With their leaders imprisoned and with over two thousand strike-breakers in the town, the strike was called off on 8th November 1892. At the start of the dispute there were 7,000 unionists working on the mine sites but by the end of the strike 3,000 members were victimised and out of work. As reported by George Dale:

Lists had been carefully prepared and were in each mine office for purpose of reference and identification ... {more} than keeping a list was done, to rid the district of such "undesirables". To Mr James Hanson, surface manager, and Mr E J Horwood underground manager of the BHP, was entrusted the task of attending to these men, and events proved that the right men were placed in charge. Bitterly opposed to any form of organization amongst the men, each set about his task in a workman-like manner. Photographs were secured: a horde of pimps were employed as petty bosses; descriptions were prepared, ... and forwarded to each mine on the field. Men were shadowed and followed and hunted from pillar to post; chased out of gang after gang, and gangsters [organizers of the gangs] threatened with dismissal, unless more careful in their selection of slaves.

Hanson, a pillar of the Church, was known to climb down an open cut at great personal risk, to drive out men working in a place so dangerous that one would hardly send his bitterest enemy into it. ... Shortly after the strike was declared off a Mr Creer came and opened a sort of Government Bureau, not for the purpose of finding jobs locally, but to issue free railway passes and coach fares to persons objectionable to the mining companies. In this way about six hundred men were "deported" in less than three months at a cost to the Government of nearly two thousand pounds.⁴

With the unions weakened, the Companies took the opportunity to reduce the wages of Miners from 10 shillings to nine shillings, and Mullockers from eight shillings and four pence to seven shillings and six pence. They also increased the hours of work from the 46 hours gained in 1889, to 48 hours. These wages were only increased in 1906/7, when agreed there should be an increase of 12.5 per cent. In 1908 the unions submitted claims to the mining companies for an increase in wages when the 1907 Agreement ran out, but despite other companies agreeing to an extension of the Agreement for another two years, the BHP, British and Block 10 Companies insisted on a reduction of wages, arguing that the 12.5 per cent increase granted in 1906-07 had been a bonus. This led to protest and a lockout of employees at these companies and the Junction Mines at Broken Hill, while the smelters at Port Pirie were also closed. When work resumed, BHP suspended underground work for two years and only carried out work at the residue dumps on the surface. As Michael O'Neil remarked, 'it was the same tactics that they used in 1892 to get rid of the militant miner by starving him out'. Intimidation was also used, with workers on one occasion having to lever pickets of a fence outside the Broken Hill Court House to protect themselves against police. One reported tactic of the police was for the police to carry unionists face down and to drop them on their faces if they showed resistance, often leading to broken noses or jaws.

Not that the affair was completely one sided. The unionists showed resistance by setting up camps all around the mines to stop the scabs getting in. The surveillance went on 24 hours a day, and it was a sight to see the fires burning at the picket camps at night. The pickets were relieved every four hours, and with a flourish of defiance some were led in procession to and from the camps led by Brass bands along Bromide and Crystal Lanes. The strikers also tore up the railway lines leading to the Silverton tramway depot to the mines, thus forcing management and police to haul goods and materials meant for sustenance of the strike breakers to be hauled by horse transport. Emphasising the strong feelings against anyone supporting the scabs was the treatment of a carter by the name of Packard whose supply trolley, escorted by mounted police, carried food, beer, and other goods to the mines. He was detested by the strikers and to this day old people in the town still sing the song 'Packard you are a scab'. [Figure 2]. The strikers had long memories and during the 1950s the author recalled that when a young and upcoming unionist was standing for election to a senior position in the union, he was vetoed by one old unionist who said 'he is no good. His grandfather scabbed in the 1909 lockout and what is bred in you comes out in the end'. Such was the feeling among the community where memories were long and where slights or misdemeanors were built into the psyche.

Figure 2: *Mock Grave set up during strike, 1892⁵*



Source: Copy provided by author.

There were some misgivings among unionists when the return to work was announced at the end of the 1909 lockout, as Delprat had announced that the ringleaders at Port Pirie would be victimized. Tom Mann recommended that these men be sacrificed to ensure the survival of the Union and though there was a majority vote to agree to the conditions, there were many union leaders who believed this was a retrograde step. As the author stated, 'I agree with their views that to sacrifice militant unionists to keep the union intact makes a mockery of "United We Stand, Divided We Fall"'. However, the situation was mitigated to a degree when some of the victimized unionists came to Broken Hill and found work under different names.

Although not a victory for the workers, the union movement remained strong. This was achieved through worker solidarity, through the spreading of information via the union paper, the *Barrier Truth* (the *Barrier Daily Truth* from 1908), and through the efforts of Thomas Mann, who, in his first three weeks in Broken Hill recruited 1600 new members into various unions. Mann's efforts in proportion to size of the workforce were even greater at the Port Pirie smelters. Financial support for those locked out came from the pockets of miners in employment at other mines who were levied at five shillings a week. Most attacks on worker wages and conditions such as in 1892, 1909 and again in 1919-1920 came about when prices were low, but BHP, as well as other companies, failed to acknowledge the huge profits that were made over time. Delprat, the General Manager of BHP in 1909 who had spent 20 years with peasant labourers in the Spanish Copper Mines, tried to treat the Broken Hill workers in the same manner, but he found out that Broken Hill miners refused to bend.

Figure 3: *Unionists march headed by Brass band, 1909 strike.*



Source: The author.

Worker solidarity

Throughout the various struggles, cooperation and support from unionists within and outside of Broken Hill helped sustain the fight against capital. In the 1909 dispute, various unions contributed £14,798 through levies on workers in the Broken Hill region, while another £30,658 was donated from individuals and unions as far away as Western Australia and New Zealand. Also in the receipt list⁶ were the London Dockers who had

in 1892 been the recipients of funds during their fight for the 'Dockers tanner'. Out of the proceedings legal fees were paid and workers and families were sustained with Union Store coupons in various denominations (from 7shillings-6pence, up to 20 shillings), in addition to bread coupons that were supplied for the duration of the strike. During the 1919-21 strike the main diet of the workers was spuds and onions, rabbits and food made available by the co-op stores. Men went to the outback to supply families with firewood, and donations were received for clothing and other necessities from outside charities and unionists. While there was much suffering, nevertheless, people were prepared to sacrifice for the greater good. The author's father Shorty O'Neil told him that John Wren was instrumental in sending khaki cloth left over after the First World War and that every striker's child could be identified by wearing the telltale cloth, while many a barefoot child was shod by donations of boots that came in from outside.

Circumstances took a positive turn in the following decade, when following a dispute in 1915-1916 to gain a 44 hour week and a stoppage on 11th January 1916 that lasted until 6th March, workers agreed to return to work on the understanding that that the dispute would be dealt with by Mr Justice Higgins at the Federal Arbitration Court on 28th April. However, before the case came to a conclusion, the New South Wales Parliament passed an Act that granted underground workers in metalliferous mines a 44-hour week. This was incorporated into the Higgins Award which came into effect in June 1916 and which lasted for three years. Among other improvements, the decision also brought in a 48-hour week for surface workers, along with an increase in their wages, and also provided for contract miners to have their wages made up to the basic wage.

July 1916 also saw the rise of the 'Labor Volunteer Army' [LVA] when a hundred members of the AMA pledged themselves to defend unionism and to fight against military conscription. This saw many clashes and altercations with members of the LVA and the Barrier Empire League who supported conscription. The 1916 referendum in 1917 saw emotions run hot but when the vote was taken, a resounding 8,922 'against' to 3,854 'for', saw its defeat. The second referendum in 1917 was also defeated. Arising out of the conscription campaign a Socialist Sunday School came into being, with Ern Wetherell appointed as Superintendent. The School, started in 1916, was formed with the idea of inculcating sound working class ideals into the minds of Barrier children – a strategy that started many a future leading union official on the path to continuing the class war struggle.

The 18-month strike of 1919-1920 was more restrained and lacked the violence and arrest of unionists that had occurred in 1892, 1909 and 1917. However, this had little to do with the changed attitude of employers who on previous occasions had brought up police from Sydney and South Australia. Rather, it came about because local member Percy Brookfield⁷ held the balance of power in the New South Wales government, and it was his actions that stopped the police from being sent to Broken Hill. The strike came about because of the failure of the New South Wales Arbitration Court to hear an application by the Craft unions for a shorter working week. There was great discontent and on 21st April 1919 the Amalgamated Society of Carpenters and

Joiners ceased work. Nine days later they were joined by the FED & FA, while the remaining Craft unions joined the action on 19th May. The strike lasted until 10th November 1920.

Living and working conditions

Wages and hours of work were not the only concern of unionists, for conditions of work, living conditions and safety issues punctuated the history of resistance. In 1918 an investigation into the conditions at Broken Hill mines began with a medical examination of all persons employed in the mining industry. The Commission found that pneumoconiosis existed among mine workers either in an uncomplicated form or in association with tuberculosis, the latter also being present as a separate disease. Of over 6,000 miners examined, 259 were withdrawn from the industry. In August 1920 a special tribunal of employers and employees sat before Justice Edmund, President of the New South Wales Arbitration Court. With some intervention by Percy Brookfield, the Edmund Award, following further recommendations by the Technical Commission and by the unions and employers, saw substantial gains whereby underground workers were granted a 35 hour week, a base rate of 15 shillings a shift, and withdrawal from the industry of all workers found to be suffering from tuberculosis or pneumoconiosis. It was also agreed that both before entering and leaving the industry, workers would have to undergo a '21 Diseases Examination' undertaken by a Medical Bureau. There were also other important developments, including improvements in ventilation; greater use of water drilling to keep down dust; a ban on stoping of ore on night shifts; and a lapse of one hour between shifts to allow lead-laden dust to subside.

Of great concern over the years had been the high death and injury rates at the Broken Hill mines because during all their struggles, workers paid with their lives. Working conditions were extremely dangerous but worker safety was not a high priority. Under the *New South Wales Mines Accidental Relief Act of 1901*, the government provided £12 to cover a funeral, eight-shillings a week for a widow, and two shillings and sixpence for any children under 14 years of age. This was also augmented by a small amount from Friendly Societies. When husbands were killed or died of dust on the lungs, women were often forced to take in washing or to run boarding houses because compensation was totally inadequate. Benefits only increased after a new *Compensation Act* came into force in 1916. Between 1890 and 1921, 439 miners died in the mines, with many years seeing double figures, the most disastrous being in 1913 when 33 men paid the supreme sacrifice. About 1,500 also died as a result of dust on the lungs. The only bodies not recovered after accidents were those of 19-year-old Thomas Jordan and 21-year-old Leopold Campbell who were buried under thousands of tons of rock on the 400 level on 8th October 1902. The author's grandfather, Michael, worked for nine months in a team that tried to recover the bodies, but were eventually forced to abandon the search because of the dangerous conditions that threatened a further collapse.

While conditions at the mine were far from salubrious, the living conditions in Broken Hill from its inception were described as unhealthy and dusty, with extreme heat in summer and cold in the winter. In the early days when the smelters were in

action, the fumes would settle on roofs and finish up in the water tanks causing many people to suffer from lead poisoning, leading to fits, something not only suffered by the inhabitants but also by their dogs. The main area where the miners lived proved a breeding ground for typhoid, enteric fever and diphtheria, not surprising when noted that sanitary pans overflowed down Crystal Lane and Argent Street. There were no showers on the mines and the town water supply was inadequate and unhealthy and often ran out. Until a pipeline was constructed from Menindee Lakes after 1952, water trains had to be organised to supply the needs of the inhabitants. As a result, child mortality was high and women, the true pioneers, had to rear children under harsh conditions. Little wonder that Broken Hill was for long recognised as probably the unhealthiest town in New South Wales.

With high mining fatalities, men suffering from dust on the lungs, and the atrocious living conditions in the town, along with men fighting to obtain a living wage, there is little wonder that the environment created the perfect setting for a class war struggle. But by 1923 the struggles had proved worthwhile, for that year the Barrier Industrial Council was formed at Broken Hill which, in the words of the author, turned the town 'into an utopia for the Trade union workers', though the euphoria did not last long.

The year of Bill O'Neil Jnr's birth, 1929, saw the onset of the Great Depression and families were once more forced to adopt various strategies to put food on the table. There were unemployment camps at the White Rocks, the 'Chateau de Tar Drums' near the Council yards, and an unemployed union formed. A group of these unemployed workers formed a wood carter camp near Ivanhoe where timber was cut and loaded onto rail trucks to be distributed in Broken Hill to genuine members of the unemployed union. The New South Wales Government provided tents and axes and transported the firewood free of charge. The scheme continued until December 1939 with the total firewood distributed amounting to 13,859 tons. Some of these unemployed men had their first job when they joined the Armed forces at the Start of World War Two, though unfortunately some of them failed to survive the war.

On 28th February 1939, all underground operations ceased at the BHP Mines. In their usual public relation exercise the afternoon shift turned up for work to be told that underground working had finished at the end of the day shift. Milling and other surface activities continued for some months until gradually phased out.

Post World War II

After the war, the 1950s and 1960s saw boom years for the Broken Hill mining industry. In 1972 the South Mine shut down but a new mining company, MMM, took over the lease and worked the underground workings for a while and then worked the surface for a few years.

In 1986, the mine management demanded an end to a number of work practices that had been in place since 1920. The main demands were for introduction of a night shift and reduction in the time lapse required before re-entry to a mine after firing had taken place. The WIU of A stopped work and the other unions under the Barrier Industrial Council went out on strike. The management applied to the NSW Industrial

Commission for an Award, and although Justice Fisher brought down an Award the BIC and affiliated unions refused to work under it. On appeal the Award was not given effect, and following the parties returning to conciliation, the unions suffered a loss of many of their hard earned conditions.

The strike lasted eight weeks and created a great deal of dissension in the town. Families were split and even children in school took sides. As one grandmother said to her grandchild who was a mining engineer, ‘you know you are wrong Trevor’ – she was one of those people who had been through the 1919-20 strike.

Michael, ‘Shorty’ and Bill O’Neil were representatives of a special breed of militant unionists who fought hard for the interests of their members and families and the working class at large. They found themselves arrayed against strong opponents but despite the hardships they also endured, and the strains of office and responsibility that at times must have been a burden hard to bear, they never waived in their fight to improve the conditions of the people they represented. While Bill’s story of the contribution of the family members represents them as ‘militants’, this is not to deny that they were also skilled negotiators, with Bill being especially respected at the Barrier by workers and mining employers alike. He, and no doubt Michael and Shorty were immersed in community affairs outside the union structure –this being associated with their sense of social duty that was put into practice in their everyday relations in community projects.

Despite his heavy Union involvement, Bill still found time to actively promote Broken Hill, both as a Councillor and as chairman of the Broken Hill Base Hospital. He also served as Chairman of the Far West Area Health Service, where he did much to promote Aboriginal health, a move that led to formation of the Maari Ma Health organisation. In his ‘spare time’, Bill was an avid supporter of local sporting organisations, being a foundation member of the Broken Hill Amateur Swimming Club where he was involved in fund raising and in competitive swimming. In addition he was a member of the local rifle-shooting club and as a young man a member of the local cycling club. Thus he was totally immersed in the community at all levels.

All three O’Neils lived through turbulent times – but there were also times of celebration, and, as noted previously, Bill proudly pointed out, ‘... in 1923 the Barrier Industrial Council was formed and Broken Hill became an utopia for the Trade union workers’. All three saw themselves as men of principle, and all delighted in singing the ‘Red Flag’ – indeed Bill had this played at his funeral in Broken Hill, much to the delight of his family and army of friends and admirers.⁸

Endnotes

¹ This was a solidarity strike with the Tramway Workshops against introduction of the ‘Taylor Card’ system

² A ‘tanner’ was sixpence, and the strike eventually saw the Dockers gain an increase of sixpence per day on their pay. There were also other issues but the strike was one of the first in British history that saw unskilled unions gain a victory over capital.

³ See, R.J. Solomon, *The Richest Lode. Broken Hill 1883-1988*, Hale & Iremonger, Sydney, 1988, p. 241.

⁴ George Dale, *The Industrial History of Broken Hill*, 1918, Ch. VIII.

⁵ A number of these mock graves that denigrated strike breakers, including shift bosses were set up around the boundary of Crystal Lane.

⁶ 'Lock-Out Balance Sheets and Secretary's and Auditor's Reports', Combined Unions' Committee. Broken Hill, 10th August 1909. Photocopy held by the author.

⁷ For Brookfield's life and activities see, Paul Robert Adams, *The Best Hated man in Australia: The Life and Death of Percy Brookfield 1875-1921*, Puncher and Wattman Biography, Glebe, 2010.

⁸ Andrew Robertson, 'Bill O'Neil 1929-2011, City mourns death of union stalwart', *Barrier Daily Truth*, 31 March 2011, p. 5.

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