

The Anatomy of a Strike: Wentworth Proprietary Co. Ltd, Orange, New South Wales 1897

By CLIVE BEAUCHAMP

Charles Sturt University, Bathurst, NSW

In 1897, at the Wentworth group of gold mines situated at Lucknow, Frederick's Valley, some five miles from Orange in the central-west of New South Wales, there occurred a thirteen-week strike. This study examines the background and critical events surrounding the dispute, discusses why the action failed and considers some of the indirect outcomes of the strike.

The strike itself occurred in one of the richest gold fields in the colony in the 1890s and many commentators at the time believed that it was one of the first strike actions in a gold mine in New South Wales. The dispute did not spring from the typical capital-labour clash over demands for higher wages, or for a 'closed shop' or even for union recognition but over specific wage reductions and the imposition by management of imperious regulations to physically search employees.¹ The dispute was important and influential. It provoked a political crisis in the colony that had the potential to bring down the minority New South Wales government that depended on the support of the Labor party. The dispute also demonstrated the need for a compulsory system of industrial arbitration and conciliation. Additionally, the involvement of many Labor parliamentarians in assisting and supporting the striking miners had a stabilising effect on the fledgling New South Wales Political Labour League (PLL) which was experiencing internal conflict in 1897 over the role of socialism in the party.²

The Lucknow strike has to be viewed in the economic context of the long-running industrial depression of the 1890s that dislocated the eastern colonies. It created a reservoir of surplus labour readily available for use as strike breakers. In the depression, unemployment rose and wage rates fell in many industries. There were many bank failures, credit restrictions and capital flows from British financial institutions (traditionally used to finance much of Australia's mining developments) virtually dried up. Eastern Australia experienced intense industrial strife in the 1890s, exemplified by the Maritime strike 1890, pastoral disputes 1891 and 1894, as well as the 'great Broken Hill' strike of 1892. All ended disastrously for the strikers. Trade unions were severely weakened and the prevailing economic conditions resulted in an

imbalance between capital and labour, with employers dominating employees in many industries.³

Compounding the economic problems was the persistence of the long drought from 1895 to 1903 that was particularly severe in the rural areas of the eastern colonies. The Wentworth gold mines were forced to close down operations for two weeks in May 1897 because of the drought.⁴

Setting the Scene

Between the 2nd August and the 1st November 1897, there was a strike at the Wentworth mine and its subsidiary mine the Aladdin's Lamp. A total of 550 men were employed in the mines in 1897. Owned technically by separate companies, they were managed by the same personnel, had the same board of English directors and were both funded with English capital. Both mines were managed by the American Superintendent, Charles Warnford Lock, appointed in mid-1895. The Wentworth Proprietary Company had been formed in 1890 and Aladdin's Lamp Gold Mining Company Ltd in 1892. A separate undertaking, the D'Arcy-Wentworth mine at Lucknow also went on strike. The miners in another Lucknow mine, owned by the Wentworth Extension Company and managed by Henry Newman did not strike.⁵

In the 1890s the economic life of Lucknow revolved around the gold mines. The small township boasted a school, three churches, two stores (one owned by Henry Newman, Member of Parliament for Orange), a bank, three public houses, a Miner's Hall, and the School of Arts Building. Most of the Lucknow miners lived in the township in neighbouring Summer Hill and Shadforth, with others resident in Orange.⁶

Originally, the whole Lucknow Estate was owned by W.C. Wentworth (known as the 'Father of the New South Wales Constitution') and used for grazing. Passing through various hands, the field was especially associated with Henry Newman who at one time managed all the Lucknow gold mines. Newman purchased the Lucknow Estate at the end of May 1889 on behalf of a syndicate whose principal partner was the American mining magnate Mr Frank Gardner. The Wentworth Proprietary Company was formed in England in November 1890 and it amalgamated many of the existing mines.⁷

Although gold had been mined on a small scale in the Lucknow locality from the late 1850s, the most productive period was from 1892 until 1899. This was associated with the Wentworth Proprietary Company and the Aladdin's Lamp Mining

Company. Cook estimates that close to seven tons of gold were mined by the two companies combined during the 1890s.⁸

From March 1891 until the end of 1899, the Wentworth Company at Lucknow produced 134,234 ounces of gold worth £531,076. Its most successful year was 1895 when the yield was 60,479 ounces which realised £232,457. This positive result was due to the ore extracted from the Phoenix vein, a deposit that was fully worked out during the year. During 1896 the gold output was reduced to 16,524 ounces valued at £62,642. In expectation of 'handsome returns in the future', the Wentworth Company invested extensively in prospecting and searching for new veins in both 1895 and 1896. With the ore body depleted, the mine eventually closed in 1901. The Aladdin's Lamp Company produced 90,469 ounces to the value of £333,000 between June 1892 and September 1899. That mine also closed in 1901.⁹

Causes of the Strike

What triggered the dispute? According to press reports, Superintendent Lock claimed that for about six months he had been aware of the existence of widespread systematic stealing of ore from both mines. Local anecdotal accounts coupled with a few arrests and one successful prosecution tended to support this. Lock had also dismissed several miners who had come under suspicion. He claimed that the mines were losing valuable ore and that is was of serious concern to the London-based directors. It is noticeable though, that the company accounts for 1896 showed that only £35 had been allocated for detecting theft.¹⁰

On the 1st July a notice appeared at the mines indicating that they were to be closed for an indefinite period due to theft of ore. Miners were requested to provide any information (in writing) on thefts to the management by the following Thursday. It also stated that when work resumed it would be under new rules and conditions (although these were not revealed) and that 'these would partly depend upon the men's disposition in either exposing or shielding the thieves'.¹¹ Technically, the Superintendent had initiated a lockout. On the same day local constables searched the houses of shift bosses and one miner was charged at the Orange Court with stealing ore from the Wentworth mine.¹²

On the following Friday, 10 July, another notice was posted to the effect that work under new conditions would commence on the following Wednesday. Wages would be reduced from their level of seven shillings and six pence (7s 6d) per day for an

eight-hour shift, to 7s for first class miners and to 6s 6d for second-class miners. Trucker's wages were to be reduced to 5s 6d. Most surface workers wages were unaffected. Up to this time, there had not been any classification of underground miners - all received 7s 6d, which was the standard for all other Lucknow mines. New stringent searching regulations were introduced, the most infamous of which was Clause 7, which authorised management to search miner's houses at any time of day or night. Miners had to apply for re-employment and also sign their agreement to the searching conditions.¹³

At a mass meeting of miners the following Monday, new rates and conditions were discussed following which, a deputation was dispatched to Lock requesting that he reconsider the reduction in day rates. Upon Lock refusing to meet the men, another mass meeting was held, a ballot taken and the men agreed to accept the new rates and conditions. According to Lock, 340 underground men re-applied, signed and agreed to the new conditions and worked for two-and-a-half weeks.¹⁴

Many miners indicated that they re-applied for work accepting the wage reduction and signing the new conditions in order to remove any stigma that would be attached to any man who did not secure readmission. Some believed that if they did not re-apply it would be seen as an admission of their dishonesty, making it difficult for them to obtain any alternative employment in the future. Many were under the impression that Lock had indicated that the wage cuts were only of a temporary duration.¹⁵ .

In the meantime, Mr Coghill, the mine manager at the D'Arcy Wentworth, announced that he was reducing wages immediately to 7s per day. Coghill indicated that the reduction was 'for the sake of economy'. He conceded however that no ore had been stolen from his mine. Possibly he saw the acceptance of lower rates by the Wentworth miners as an opportunity and followed suit. Reacting to the announcement, the D'Arcy miners (55 in total), went on strike on 1 August. At this time, the mine had not produced any gold and the company was running out of capital.¹⁶

The Course of the Strike

On Sunday 2 August, with Lock away in Sydney, a meeting of Wentworth miners decided to strike 'due to the injustice of reducing wages'. With a Strike Committee elected (Herman Jaeger and Otto Jaeger Secretary and Chairman respectively), they organised pickets and appealed for support from local businesses, other mining

communities and trade unions. As they did not have a union they did not possess a strike fund. The meeting also decided to form a miner's union and invited Labor members of Parliament to address them.¹⁷

On Tuesday 4 August, on his return to Lucknow, Lock issued another notice, informing workers that they had until the next day to hand in their names for work at the new rates, or face discharge and eviction from the company cottages. The Strike Committee attempted to persuade the mine engineers and surface men to strike. Their wages had not been affected. There was a certain amount of tension over this but the engineers walked out and after a 'split ballot' some of the surface men (who were being intimidated by pickets) followed.¹⁸

What were Lock's motives? If he was concerned about the alleged thefts why did he ask the miners to act as informants when machinery for detecting theft was already in place? If the mechanisms were inadequate, why didn't he devote more resources to the problem? By locking-out the miners and reducing wages was he attempting to recoup money lost to the company through the alleged thefts? It could be argued that there was a sense of punishment or retribution in his actions. Were the problems over theft simply a subterfuge for improving the economic position of the mines by downsizing? In one interview Lock maintained that:

In any case, I intended to shorten hands and I told the deputation so. I told them that they had simply played into my hands for this has simply facilitated the weeding out of the unnecessary men. Now I am able to sort out the sheep from the goats.¹⁹

Lock was asked that if he had known about the thefts for six months, why weren't the men detected and punished instead of holding the whole body of miners responsible? His response was '... they are held morally responsible for the presumed guilt of some of their number'.²⁰

On the third day of the strike, the Strike Committee sent a letter to Lock requesting that he receive a deputation from them. Lock's cryptic response was that he would receive a deputation of three employees only and the meeting would be confined to hearing their explanations as to why they had ceased work. No other issues were to be entertained. No deputation was appointed, as apparently the reply appeared to hurt the dignity of the Strike Committee's chairman, Otto Jaeger, who was not an employee of the company. Throughout the strike Lock refused to recognise the legitimacy of the Strike Committee.²¹

In the early stages of the strike, Richard Sleath MLA (Labor-Wilcannia) and Henry Newman MLA (Free Trade-Orange) addressed local meetings in support of the men. Sleath and Newman's offer to meet with the Superintendent and negotiate a settlement was rejected by Lock. Sleath implored the strikers to stay within the law, avoid violence and to hold out, for theirs, he said, was 'a just cause'. He agreed to enlist the support of trade unions and other political organisations. Newman asserted that the '... ore stealing was merely a blind - the real problem was the mines'.²² They were later joined by other Labor members of the New South Wales Parliament, including William J. Ferguson (Sturt), William Morris Hughes (Sydney-Lang) and Tom Brown (Condobolin). Donations to the strike fund were received regularly from many mining communities in the colony, and from Victoria, and even from the gold miners of Coolgardie and Kalgoorlie.²³

Eventually, on 10 August, a small deputation from the Strike Committee met with Lock to ask him if they could be re-employed at the old rates - but he refused. On the same day, led by Richard Sleath, a group of all-party members, many representing mining constituencies, met with the Minister for Mines, Sydney Smith. The group included Labor leader James McGowen (Redfern), George Black (Labor, Sydney-Gipps), William F. Hurley (Protectionist, Macquarie), Robert Jones (Free Trade, Mudgee), Edward D. Millen (Free Trade, Bourke) Thomas Waddell (Protectionist, Cobar) and John C. Watson (Labor, Young). They argued that searching worker's homes was degrading and not to be tolerated in a civilised country, and was contrary to common law. The wages were also the lowest of any Australian gold mine. Sleath reminded the Minister that under the *Mining on Private Lands Act 1894*, 200 men should be working at the Wentworth mines and that failure to comply with the labour conditions made the mines' lease liable for forfeit. The minister astounded the group when he informed them that the mines in question did not have a lease but operated under a permit under the *Land Act 1861* (that did not contain any labour conditions). He claimed that there had been complications with the land title and a lease was to be issued as soon as possible. The group felt deflated and embarrassed.²⁴

On 16 August, 36 miners were given notice to quit their company cottages within seven days. Lock was being generous because legally he only had to give 48 hours notice. This issue, together with the 'obnoxious searching regulations' (equated by some to the *Irish Arms Act*), generated a great deal of public sympathy throughout Australia for the Lucknow strikers, and strengthened the miner's resolve. There was

also a general fear in the wider community that initiatives to reduce miner's wages would be implemented in other mines in the colony.²⁵

The wives of the striking miners formed a deputation and attempted to meet with Lock but he declined to see them. He derided their attempt and claimed that the strikers had sent their wives with 'babes in arm' because 'they have no backbone'.²⁶

Premier George Reid, on his return from the Diamond Jubilee celebrations and the Colonial Conference in London, was approached on 8 September by a group of Labor members, including Richard Sleath, to arbitrate on the dispute. Reid agreed to mediate if invited by both parties, but Lock flatly refused to meet him.²⁷ When interviewed by a *Melbourne Argus* reporter on the issue of Reid's offer to mediate Lock responded:

... mediate what is there to mediate about? I don't want any mediation or intervention whatsoever by anyone. It is the intervention of people, who are not concerned in this matter-that I complain about. The men who form the Strike Committee (so-called) either have never even been in my employment or have been sacked. If outsiders only allow me to attend to my own business the strike would be at an end. How could Reid presume to come here and dictate as to the conditions under which I shall employ miners. If I were so weak that I could not run my business I would consent to mediation I do not manage the colony, but only the mines.²⁸

By the fourth week of the strike the mines were still operating, but at a greatly reduced capacity. The Superintendent acted as a trucker and other officials and clerks performed manual jobs. It was reported that there were about 30 underground workers and a 20-stamp battery working continuously. At full capacity for three shifts, 400 men were needed at the mines. Lock had erected a six-foot fence [1.83 metres] enclosing the mines and anticipating the arrival of 'free labourers' (scabs), had brought in provisions and stretcher beds.²⁹

The ministerial minute and the suspension of labour conditions

Lock was compelled to apply for a suspension of the labour conditions to prevent the forfeiture of the lease. This was granted pending a hearing of the Orange Warden's Court scheduled for 22 October. The warden had advised the minister that the suspension had been applied for on the grounds 'that the mines were unworkable owing to the strike and the intimidation of workers by pickets'.³⁰ The Minister for Mines, Sydney Smith, instead of applying for a ruling from the New South Wales Attorney-General, consulted the Crown Solicitor, who gave the following opinion:

... the rate of wages paid to miners or the conditions under which they work, were not causes that made a mine unworkable under the meaning of the Mining on Private Lands Act 1894.³¹

Based on that opinion, Smith penned and also published widely in newspapers, a minute to the warden on the issue that proved to be both historic and controversial. He claimed that a strike was not sufficient cause for suspending labour conditions and declared that Lock's application should not be determined by the warden unless he had 'clearly laid before him the law, bearing on the case, as interpreted by the Crown Solicitor'. Some considered such a declaration by Smith to be a directive to the judicial official (the warden) and viewed it as ministerial interference with the independence of the judiciary.³²

Additionally, Smith went out of his way in his minute to suggest grounds upon which the application for suspension by the company could be accepted. He wrote that 'if the mine was flooded, roof fallen in, the water supply had failed or there was inadequate ventilation - they might constitute grounds for suspension'.³³ Smith had played into Lock's hands. When the case was heard on 22 October, Lock gave the grounds for suspension as '... flooded mine, water supply failure and ineffective ventilation'.³⁴ On Lock's statement, uncorroborated or questioned, Warden John L. King ignored the Minister's minute and granted a partial suspension for one month with 60 men employed. Smith at one stage was lauded as the miner's champion, but later when the full significance of the minute was realised he became their worst enemy. The Minister's action was then severely criticised by sections of the press as constituting unwarranted interference in a purely judicial proceeding.³⁵ Many newspapers editorialised that such interference would have the effect of frightening away English capital that was badly needed for mining development in the colony.³⁶

This gave Lock all he wanted. The warden's decision coupled with the 'scabs' that arrived next day, and the return to work of the surface men on the 26 October, all dealt a massive blow to the striker's cause and virtually put an end to the strike.³⁷

Earlier, on 21 September, a small party of seven miners from Bendigo, accompanied by a police escort, entered the mine compound. They had arrived by train at Kelso, near Bathurst and were transported by coach to the mines, the pickets being taken by surprise.³⁸

The biggest psychological blow delivered to the strikers, was the arrival on 23 October of 86 men from Bendigo and Castlemaine, Victoria. They crossed the

barricades and entered the mine compound without a protesting voice raised. In a planned operation of military precision, the men were conveyed by coach to Melbourne, shipped to Sydney on a steamer where they cruised the harbour, played cricket and picnicked at Clontarf. They were then transported to Parramatta by boat where, from all accounts, they enjoyed a hearty dinner. With a special train waiting at Parramatta, and accompanied by a contingent of policemen, they travelled through the night until they disembarked at Huntley near Lucknow. There they were escorted one-and-a-half miles across country to the mines by 10 mounted troopers. They were engaged for six months at 7s per day and fed and housed at the company's expense.³⁹ A statement from the Secretary of the Bendigo Miner's Association colourfully described the men that had left for Lucknow as '... the scum of the streets of Bendigo and woodchoppers'.⁴⁰

Was it a violent strike?

Compared to earlier Australian strikes in the 1890s there were only a small number of violent incidents at Lucknow. Lock's groom was attacked; there were other minor assaults on 'scabs' and a few successful prosecutions for 'bad language'. The most notable incident was the explosion of a dynamite bomb near the compound where the 'scabs' were housed. Another failed to explode. Lock attributed it to the strikers but they strenuously denied their involvement. They claimed that it was the work of outsiders who wanted to create hostility towards the strikers and alienate public sympathy. At any one time it was estimated that there were only a dozen police on duty at Lucknow during the strike. This contrasts with the huge police contingent at the 1892 Broken Hill dispute.⁴¹ Lock commented favourably on the relatively non-violent nature of the strike compared to those he had experienced in the United States, where, on one occasion, in a Californian mine dispute, he had been injured and five men killed. At the time of the Lucknow dispute the press were reporting the 22 strike-related fatalities at the Coleraine mines in Pennsylvania.⁴²

Political crisis and the censure motion

On 26 and 27 October there was speculation in the New South Wales Parliament that Labor caucus members were disappointed with Minister Sydney Smith and with the Reid government over the Lucknow affair. Press reports speculated that to embarrass the Government, Labor's leader, James McGowen, would call for a vote of no confidence during a debate on the adjournment. Labor specifically wanted the

Government to establish an inquiry into the handling of the Lucknow strike. Reid's Free Trade minority government had been in power since 1894 and depended on the 18 Labor members for support. In essence, Labor expected concessions from the government as they held the balance of power between the government and the protectionist opposition led by William Lyne.⁴³

Rather than waiting for a Labor motion, Lyne, aware of Labor's sentiments, seized the initiative. Hoping to drive a wedge between the Government and Labor, he tabled notice of a separate motion on 28 October that censured the Government for 'maladministration of justice over the strike'. As a result, the House adjourned and Premier Reid scheduled the censure motion debate for the 2nd November. There appeared to be great excitement in a very animated Legislative Assembly that Labor members would side with the Opposition and bring down the Government. In particular it was thought that some Labor members representing mining constituencies were anxious to show their independence from the Reid government, and would support Lyne's motion. Some Opposition members were so confident of victory that there were discussions in the corridors of Parliament House over the distribution of portfolios.⁴⁴

In a heated censure motion debate on 2 November, Lyne accused the Minister for Mines, Sydney Smith, of abuse of executive power in trying to influence the warden's decision. He also criticised Smith for requesting the legal opinion from the Crown Solicitor and not from the senior law officer, the Attorney-General. Smith, strongly supported by his leader, Premier George Reid, defended his position, claiming that it was his duty to lay the Crown Solicitor's opinion before the warden. Some opposition members asserted that Smith had attempted to dictate to the warden. In response, Smith argued that:

I have done nothing of the kind. What I have insisted upon is that the warden should have placed before him, not my reading of the law, but the reading of the law of the Crown.

The Minister also produced evidence showing that during the first 10 months of 1897, departments had referred 111 cases (for rulings) to the Attorney-General and 575 cases to the Crown Solicitor. Smith castigated Lyne for attempting to make an alliance with the Labor Party in order to force the Government out of office.⁴⁵

Press comments on the debate appeared to agree that Lyne had not made out a solid case in support of his censure motion. An interjection during the debate by James

Ashton (Free Trade, Goulburn) proved to be critical. He asked Lyne whether Minister Smith had the right to communicate the Crown's legal opinion to the Warden of the Orange Mining Court. When Lyne responded in the affirmative, it appeared to demolish his case.⁴⁶

Following a stormy Labor caucus meeting held before the censure debate, Labor leader McGowen, decided not to proceed with his motion and avoided the trap set by Lyne. In the debate he argued that it was not a case of the Government interfering, but of it not interfering enough in the dispute. He also indicated also that his party's complaints were not with the Minister but with the actions of the warden. Labor's W.M. Hughes attacked the Protectionist opposition for their failure to support the strikers, declaring that the 'strike had been defeated by the scabs from that Protectionist Paradise - Victoria'. Lyne's censure motion was defeated 63 votes to 35, with the 17 Labor members present voting with the Government and guaranteeing its survival. Although, according to one press report, the debate generated a lot of enthusiasm, many members of the Assembly simply wanted to get away to Melbourne for the racing carnival.⁴⁷

The strike called off

Four days after the arrival of the scabs from Victoria, Lock, in a letter published in the *Evening News*, indicated that the searching rules applicable to the miner's cottages had been revoked. He claimed that all current miners were not asked to sign them and that the only searching was in the changing rooms, which was normal practice. Lock emphasised that they were only introduced for the specific purpose of testing the miner's honesty. Of course it could be argued that if his announcement had come earlier it might have facilitated a settlement. It is perhaps significant that his withdrawal of the searching regulation occurred only after he had partially manned the mines.⁴⁸ The withdrawal of the regulation undermined in some measure the strike's legitimacy and reduced public sympathy for the striker's cause.

Thirty former employees indicated to Lock that they wanted to resume work and were sent letters on 30 October informing them that they could return to work on condition that the strike was called off and that there was no further interference with company employees. At the same time he met with two former employees (Messrs Stein and Whitburn) informing them that he would revert to the old rates of pay on the 1st May 1898 and in the meantime would pay 7s 6d per shift to '... those who I am able to place on contract work'.⁴⁹ He then admitted that these were the terms he would have

conceded three months previously had his own men approached him. This verbal communication was then followed-up in a letter to the two men, who submitted it to the Strike Committee. It was significant that Lock did not convey his message directly to the Strike Committee, but through those who did not represent the Committee and who did not have the authority to speak on the behalf of the strikers. By communicating with those who lacked the voice of authority, Lock courted misrepresentation and disagreement, something noted by local evangelist, Mr Walker, who warned the strikers of the ambiguity of Lock's message. Walker claimed that Lock was intimating that '... if you call the strike off I will re-engage you, as I please, or none of you as I so choose'. Following two protracted mass meetings the Strike Committee finally called off its action on the 1st November.⁵⁰

Many of the strikers had some doubt as to whether Lock had stated expressly that he would revert to the old wage rate while some of them accused him of trickery in the way he had made his communication and how it had been framed.⁵¹ Three days later the manager of the smaller D'Arcy mine also agreed to pay the standard rate and that strike was also called off.

Complications arose in the ranks of the Wentworth and Aladdin's strikers when it became clear that Lock was only prepared to pay 7s 6d to a very small group of former employees, the majority being offered 7s. On 4 November the committee rescinded the decision to end the strike but after further discussions reinstated it two days later. Some men re-applied for employment under contract,⁵² while many miners moved away from Lucknow to other mining locations and to go shearing. Some were engaged in prospecting and or tributing (paying the company a commission for gold found). According to one press report, the Wentworth Board Chairman, Lord Kilmorey, claimed that the strike 'had been a good thing as it introduced a superior stamp of miner and there had been a thorough break-up of the old gang of thieves and receivers'.⁵³

The following year, 1898, the two mines combined employed only 358 men - down from the total of 550 in 1897. Nevertheless, the Wentworth Company in 1898 increased its gold returns as 'good stone' was discovered through its Welcome Vein. During that year the two mines produced a total of 24,944 ounces valued at £83,632. In 1899, however, Lock in a pessimistic report to the London-based directors, indicated that the mines were no longer productive 'due to the decadence of the ore bodies'. He resigned in August 1899 and the mines ceased operations in early 1901.⁵⁴

Conclusion

What had the miners achieved by striking? The strikers achieved a partial victory through the withdrawal of the searching regulation and the re-engagement of a small number of miners on contract at the standard wage rate. Of course, Lock could pick and choose whom he would employ. Without doubt, the Superintendent was intent on reducing the workforce, as in the long term it had been obvious that the Wentworth field was in decline. Lock's emphasis on the stealing of ore could be interpreted as merely a pretext or subterfuge for the impending staff reductions due to the economic position of the mines. If there were multiple thefts of gold why did he not allocate more resources to address the problem? The previous mine superintendent, W.J. Collins, had employed three private detectives at the mines but Lock had dispensed with their services when he was appointed in 1895. Nevertheless, there were a handful of successful prosecutions for the theft of ore in 1895.⁵⁵

The position of the Lucknow strikers was undoubtedly weakened by the existence of an alternative supply of labour from outside the Lucknow-Orange area. This situation was the result of the high rate of unemployment during the depression of the 1890s. It has been estimated that generally, in eastern Australia, between 25 per cent and 30 per cent of skilled workers were unemployed, with much higher rates recorded for the unskilled.⁵⁶ Throughout the course of the strike, Lock and his officials claimed that they were inundated with applications for work from men in Victoria, South Australia and other parts of New South Wales.⁵⁷ 'Scabs' willing to work at the reduced wage rates, undoubtedly played a vital role in the defeat of the strike at Lucknow, as they did in the other major labour disputes of the 1890s. Initially, a small number, they allowed Lock to continue operating the mines (albeit at a decreased capacity) and to undertake routine maintenance. When the lease was finally granted, the arrival of the 86 Victorian 'scabs', together with the return to work of the surface men allowed Lock to fulfil the labour conditions. This demolished the striker's cause and they capitulated with some returning under the new conditions.

Lock bore some responsibility for the prolonged dispute. His introduction of the searching regulation insulted the Lucknow miners and attracted widespread public sympathy for their cause. Throughout the course of the strike, he displayed an uncompromising and inflexible management style. It could be claimed that his specific style was the result of his early career in American mines that was characterised by turbulent and often violent management-labour relations.

He snubbed the two parliamentarians Henry Newman and Richard Sleath who wanted to discuss the strike and rejected Premier Reid's offer to mediate. In refusing to meet and negotiate with the elected Strike Committee, and in his insistence in dealing individually with his own employees, who did not have the backing of the committee, Lock exhibited an anti-union stance. This again could be viewed as the product of American management's attitude to labour relations and to union agitation. It also demonstrated the dominance of employers in labour relations in the eastern colonies of Australia during the latter stages of the depression of the 1890s.

Gold miners were traditionally considered as independent, sometimes itinerant, non-militant workers who did not readily embrace unionism and its methods. Richard Sleath, maintained in a speech at Orange during the strike that he had originally urged the miners to form a union in 1891 but they had refused.⁵⁸ At Lucknow there was little semblance of a union culture and no tradition of organising a strike. Their lack of organisation was reflected in the ease with which the Victorian 'scabs' were allowed to enter the mine compound. According to press reports, there was no resistance to their entry except from a few miners' wives.⁵⁹

The strike produced some indirect outcomes. The nature of the Lucknow dispute, coupled with the dislocation caused by the other strikes in the 1890s, highlighted the need for reform in the sphere of industrial relations. The *Melbourne Age* editorialising on the Lucknow strike, claimed that 'had a proper system of arbitration and conciliation been in existence such a misunderstanding could not have occurred'.⁶⁰ Misunderstanding apart, after having expressed early misgivings, there were sections of colonial society, especially in the New South Wales labour movement that favoured a compulsory system of arbitration and conciliation. Although Sir Henry Parkes had introduced a voluntary system in 1891, it lacked powers and was ignored by both employers and unions. The futility of the Lucknow dispute, in the shadow of the compulsory system that had been introduced and readily adopted in New Zealand in 1894, led to greater efforts to achieve compulsory industrial arbitration in the colony. The New Zealand example became a prototype for the New South Wales *Arbitration and Conciliation Act 1901* and later its Commonwealth counterpart in 1904.⁶¹ The Lucknow strike played some small part in raising awareness for the need of a compulsory arbitration and conciliation system in the colony.

The strike also impacted on the fledgling New South Wales Labor party, the Political Labour League (PLL) as it was named. The PLL, a 'broad church' of diverse

interests, was experiencing severe problems in 1897 in terms of its policy agenda, over the place of socialism in the party. Its socialist wing had passed a conference motion aiming ‘to achieve the transfer of the means of production, distribution and exchange from private ownership to the state and municipal ownership’. There was a gap emerging between the grand goals of achieving a socialist society and the practical realities of colonial life and winning parliamentary seats. Many moderate members of the Political Labour League feared an anti-socialist backlash at elections.⁶²

The role played by the Labor party members in the strike demonstrated that the Labor party had a role to play in ‘practical politics’. Labor parliamentarians such as Tom Brown (Condobolin), William J. Ferguson (Sturt), William Morris Hughes (Sydney-Lang), James McGowen (Redfern), Richard Sleath (Wilcannia), Josiah Thomas (Alma-Broken Hill) and John C. Watson (Young), all assisted the striking miners but were unable to arrange a negotiated settlement. They gave moral support, organised donations, provisions and clothing and publicised their cause. According to Nairn ‘... in the long run their activities helped to improve working conditions for miners and end the degrading searching conditions’. Their ‘humanitarianism in action’ distanced them from the rhetoric of the socialists, with their foreign theories of violent revolution, a socialist society and the nationalisation of the means of production. Later in 1897, the Sydney District of the Political Labour League shed its socialist wing. They left to form the Australian Socialist Labor Party. As a result, the strike contributed to the stabilisation of the embryonic New South Wales Labor party and assisted it in retaining rural seats, many of which were in mining communities.⁶³

Endnotes

¹ *Evening News*, 12 August 1897, p. 3, *Town and Country Journal*, 21 August 1897, p. 32.

² B. Nairn, *Civilising Capitalism: The Beginnings of the Australian Labor Party 1850-1910*, Melbourne UP, Melbourne, 1989, pp. 184-7.

³ T.A. Coghlan, *Labour and Industry in Australia*, vol. 4, Macmillan, Melbourne, 1969 (reprint), pp. 2038-2049.

⁴ *National Advocate*, 10 August 1897, p. 3.

⁵ L.F. Harper, *The Lucknow Goldfield*, Government Printer, Sydney, 1920, pp. 19-22.

⁶ K.M. Cook, *Lucknow: A Veritable Goldmine*, Orange City Council, Orange, NSW, 1995, pp. 42-60.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 68, 82-3.

⁹ Harper, *The Lucknow Goldfield*, pp. 19-22; *National Advocate*, 7 July 1897, p. 3.

¹⁰ *Daily Telegraph*, 12 August 1897, p. 5.

¹¹ *Bathurst Daily Times*, 3 July 1897, p. 3.

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- ¹² According to local press reports there were only two successful prosecutions for gold theft at the mines in 1897. See *National Advocate*, 8 and 11 July 1897, p. 3.
- ¹³ *Daily Telegraph*, 12 July 1897, p. 5.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 11 August 1897, p. 4.
- ¹⁶ *Bathurst Free Press and Mining Journal*, 3 August 1897, p. 3.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 4 August 1897, p. 4. At the time of the strike, Otto Jaeger, the elected Chairman of the Strike Committee, was not an employee of the Wentworth Company. He had been dismissed two months earlier. At various times in the 1890s he was a part-time journalist and unsuccessful candidate for the NSW Legislative Assembly.
- ¹⁸ *Bathurst Daily Times*, 6 August 1897, p. 2.
- ¹⁹ *Daily Telegraph*, 12 August 1897, p. 5.
- ²⁰ *Evening News*, 12 August 1897, p. 4.
- ²¹ *Daily Telegraph*, 12 August 1897, p. 5.
- ²² *Bathurst Daily News*, 7 August 1897, p. 3.
- ²³ *Bathurst Free Press and Mining Journal*, 1 September 1897, p. 4.
- ²⁴ *Town and Country Journal*, 14 August 1897, p. 4.
- ²⁵ *Barrier Miner*, 18 August 1897, p. 4.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, 17 August 1897, p. 3.
- ²⁷ George Reid had mediated successfully in the Newcastle miners' strike in 1895. *Bathurst Daily Times*, 9 September 1897, p. 4.
- ²⁸ *Melbourne Argus*, 11 September 1897, p. 6.
- ²⁹ *Town and Country Journal*, 11 September 1897, p. 32.
- ³⁰ *New South Wales Government Gazette*, 14 September 1897, no. 718, p. 6582.
- ³¹ *New South Wales Votes and Proceedings*. Legislative Assembly, 1897, vol. 3, pp. 1235.
- ³² *Town and Country Journal*, 30 October 1897, p. 18.
- ³³ *Ibid.*
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*
- ³⁶ *Daily Telegraph*, 23 October 1897, p. 5; *The Bulletin*, 30 October 1897, p. 16.
- ³⁷ *Town and Country Journal*, 30 October 1897, p. 18.
- ³⁸ *Daily Telegraph*, 22 September 1897, p. 6.
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*, 25 October 1897, p. 5.
- ⁴⁰ *Barrier Miner*, 29 October 1897, p. 3.
- ⁴¹ *Town and Country Journal*, 2 October 1897, p. 13.
- ⁴² *Evening News*, 25 October 1897, p. 6.
- ⁴³ *Bathurst Daily News*, 29 October 1897, p. 4; *Evening News*, 29 October 1897, p. 5.
- ⁴⁴ *Evening News*, 30 October 1897, p. 6.
- ⁴⁵ *New South Wales Parliamentary Debates*, Legislative Assembly, 1897, vol.90, pp. 4265-4312.
- ⁴⁶ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 November 1897, p. 5; *Newcastle Morning Herald*, 4 November 1897, p. 3.
- ⁴⁷ *Daily Telegraph*, 3 November 1897, p. 5.
- ⁴⁸ *Evening News*, 27 October 1897, p. 6.
- ⁴⁹ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 November 1897, p. 7.
- ⁵⁰ *Daily Telegraph*, 4 November 1897, p. 5.
- ⁵¹ *Barrier Miner*, 6 November 1897, p. 4.
- ⁵² *Ibid.*
- ⁵³ Cook, *Lucknow: A Veritable Goldmine*, p. 95.
- ⁵⁴ Harper, *The Lucknow Goldfield*, pp. 19-22.
- ⁵⁵ *National Advocate*, 8 July 1897, p. 3.
- ⁵⁶ B.K. de Garis, '1890-1900', in Frank Crowley (ed.), *A New History of Australia*, Heinemann, Melbourne, 1972, p. 225.
- ⁵⁷ *Daily Telegraph*, 12 August 1897, p. 5.
- ⁵⁸ *National Advocate*, 6 August 1897, p. 3.
- ⁵⁹ *Daily Telegraph*, 23 August 1897, p. 5.
- ⁶⁰ *Melbourne Argus*, 3 November 1897, p. 6.
- ⁶¹ R. Gollan, *Radical and Working Class Politics: A Study of Eastern Australia 1850-1910*, Melbourne UP, Carlton, 1970 (reprint). pp. 156-7.
- ⁶² Nairn, *Civilising Capitalism: The Beginnings of the Australian Labor Party*, pp. 184-7.
- ⁶³ *Ibid.*