Looking back from his seat in the Australian Parliament with nineteen years’ hindsight, William Guthrie Spence, President of the Amalgamated Shearers’ Union during the 1890 Maritime Strike, wrote that ‘the year 1890 is, by unanimous consent, the turning point in Labor history, and marks the beginning of the abolition of class dominance and the introduction of truly democratic government’. The idea of 1890 as a turning point has been a theme for historiographical debate since the 1950s. This article examines the cartoons of the radical newspaper the Bull-ant, using them to offer a cultural interpretation of the politics of the strike.

The Maritime Strike of 1890 was the first of the great strikes which characterise relations between labour and capital in that decade. While formally precipitated by the refusal of the shipowners to allow the Maritime Officers’ Association to affiliate with the Melbourne Trades’ Hall Council, the strike was a broad struggle between employers gathered together under the banner of freedom of contract and workers defending the principle of unionism. It touched nearly every sector of the colonies. From 16 August 1890, when the officers struck, the strike grew such that by the middle of September it involved seamen, watersiders, shearers, coal miners, silver-lead miners, carters and drivers, and miscellaneous trades-people. In all ‘at least 50,000 people were out of work in the Australian colonies, and at least 8000 more in New Zealand’.

The Bull-ant was founded on 8 May 1890 by Edward Dyson and cartoonist Tom Durkin. It was a fellow traveller, rather than an organ of labour, and, as Geoffrey Serle uncharitably remarks, a ‘pale copy’ of the Sydney Bulletin – a weekly, featuring cartoons, prose and verse of both a serious and comic turn. It enjoyed healthy sales in its inaugural year, attacking the Chinese, the clergy, and the British with considerable vigour. Following pressure from the Bulletin, it changed its name in 1891 to the Ant. Suffering from the effects of the depression and the costly loss of a defamation case, it went out of business on 30 June 1892. Edward Dyson, who had contributed all the written material in the paper, employing a range of pseudonyms, went on to a successful freelance

1 W. G. Spence, Australia’s Awakening: Thirty Years in the Life of an Australian Agitator (Sydney: The Worker Trustees, 1909), 25.
career in writing – in particular, as a regular contributor to the *Bulletin*.

During the strike, the paper’s editorial position became strident as the dispute grew in magnitude and obvious importance:

> Unionism is glorious – it is the mighty lever that is lifting workers out of the sloughs in which they have struggled blindly for generations. It levers upward and downward – raises the ill-paid toiler and brings the bloated monopolist down.⁵

At this time, it devoted a preponderance of its cartoons to the strike. These cartoons established a way of understanding the strike and its primary participants, offering us an insight into the political idiom of the day.

### Righteous and Resolute Masculinity

The first image on the Maritime Strike in the *Bull-ant* appeared on 21 August 1890. Entitled ‘Just before the Battle’ (Figure 1), it shows a clean-cut maritime officer, in a military cap, dark jacket and white trousers. Holding a telescope, he leans against Trades’ Hall’s fort cannon, similar to the cannons on the forts which dotted Victoria’s coastline. The caption reads: ‘Skipper of “the Shipowner” – “Fort, ahoy, there! Spike that big gun of yours, and then we’ll meet”’.⁶ The image denotes a simple narrative. The maritime officers had affiliated with Trades’ Hall, and, against the protests of the ship owners, continued to stand by that decision. The shipowners and the maritime officers were preparing for a fight. In this, the maritime officers would rely on the strength of Trades’ Hall for their protection.

Along with establishing this narrative, the image is the first indication of a resolute, righteous masculinity – a key theme developed in the *Bull-ant*’s imagery through the period of the strike. Bruce Scates has drawn attention to the importance of examining the participants in the maritime strike as men, arguing that manhood is central to the discourse of the strike.⁷ An examination of the cartoons of the *Bull-ant* supports this contention.

In ‘Just before the Battle’, a maritime officer leans with casual familiarity against the cannon. His knee juts in the same direction held by his gaze. He has an air of calm purpose. The telescope demonstrates his command of the situation, the cannon his capacity to act when need demands it. The officer waits in comfortable readiness. It is not readiness to attack that is portrayed. While one would certainly expect a publication such as the *Bull-ant* to present Trades’ Hall and unionists in a position of strength, in this case the strength is not aggressive in posture – a fort and fixed cannon, and an easy wait. The enemy is not within the frame, but the caption makes clear that it is the shipowners who are spoiling for a

---

⁵ *Bull-ant*, 11 November 1890, 4.
⁶ *Bull-ant*, 21 August 1890.
fight. We are asked to be confident that when the enemy makes itself visible, man and cannon stand resolute to respond.

Both the written and visual language of the cartoon are characterised by its military nature – battle, fort and a big gun. The gun in particular dominates the image, framing the maritime officer and providing the platform on which he stands. This gives the cartoon a tone of respectable, disciplined, military masculinity – further enhanced by the uniformed respectability of the officer. Underlining this respectability is the capacity for violence. Violence underpins the strength presented in the image, but is held in check – the casual posture of the officer asks the reader to understand that this violence will be used only to thwart attack. This has a moral and a civic implication. If the violence inherent in the resolute masculinity of the officers and the Trades’ Hall is used in self defence, not aggressively, then the violence becomes more permissible. In a civil society the use of violence in self-defence is acceptable, but the use of aggressive violence in pursuit of one’s own ends is not. In anticipation of the struggle ahead, the Maritime Officers and Trades’ Hall are characterised in a position of moral authority.

This form of masculinity draws on the ambiguous class position occupied by the maritime officer. On the one hand, the officer is a highly trained figure of command on board a ship, having had to pass a series of examinations to attain rank and having had to work their way through a ladder of seniority. Yet on the other hand, an officer worked obscene hours – up to eighteen a day – and upon reaching port could as readily be without work as a lowly seaman – he could be one moment a master, the next an unemployed worker. In the words of Rowland Bradley, the acting secretary of the Mercantile Marine Officers’ Association of New South Wales during the strike, ‘Officers seem to be the butt between employers and what may be termed the regular labourer or wage-earner. For years past an officer has had no definite position or standing’.8 In his evidence to the New South Wales Royal Commission on the strike, Bradley characterised his colleagues’ positions when he said of himself ‘I am here as an example of steadiness and sobriety on board my ship, and as an instance of instant dismissal and no reason given’.9 This steadiness and sobriety, the respectable nature of the maritime officer, was a powerful tool for the Bull-ant. The lack of job security, the long hours of work and the weeks away from home put the officers in the same camp as the worker. The cartoons of Tom Durkin harnessed the gravitas of the officer-worker to create a resolute and righteous masculinity that came to characterise the cause of labour, a cause as common to the maritime officer as to the wharfie unloading his vessel.

This form of masculinity is extended through a number of subsequent cartoons. In ‘Gillies on the Warpath’, the fat Victorian Premier sits astride a donkey, facing a strong, stone, ‘Union Wall’.10 As in ‘Just before the Battle’, a cannon is readied for battle, although in this instance

---

9 ibid., 270.
10 Bull-ant, 4 September 1890.
the foe has arrived (the depiction of Gillies will be discussed in detail below). Set in the wall itself is the face of “Labor” (Figure 2). Surprisingly, when compared to other depictions of labour across the period of this study, the face is an aged one. Deep-set eyes, a heavy and furrowed brow, and weathered lines, contrast with the youth who is more readily associated with heroic masculinity. But in this instance maturity sits well with a resolute position. The face is dignified and wise, in contrast, as we will see, with a baby-faced Gillies. As with the fort, the wall motif illustrates strength against attack, defence not aggression.

The following week, labour is again embodied in the mature male figure (Figure 3). With arms folded comfortably in front of his chest, the marine officer’s stance is non-threatening, his demeanour wise and stern. This use of age adds to the moral strength of the defensive posture. Age demands respect, speaking from wisdom and experience.

The female figure in this image is also of interest. She stands in long robes holding two weapons. Her right hand rests nonchalantly on the hilt of a broadsword labelled ‘Strike’, her left on a list of union demands. Across her waist is a girdle labelled ‘Trades’ Hall’. The caption below names her ‘Unity’. Her eyes look not to her weapon, but down her nose to the representative of the Employers’ Association. Calm and purposeful, her pose is similar to that of the maritime officer in ‘Just before the Battle’ but differs in a key respect. In her case, she is carefully watched by a maritime officer, who surveys the scene from over her shoulder, his face sitting slightly higher than hers on the plane of the image. She speaks to the employer representing the union man behind her. He, on the other hand, ensures that all proceeds as it should, lending his strength to hers.

Her pale robes stand in contrast to the dark clothing of the men. This paleness alludes to a purity of purpose, lending moral weight to her actions and her tools – the sword and the list of demands. Hence, while this image is the most aggressive to date, the two symbols of aggression are feminised – the sword is pure and the demands sanctified. This lends further strength to the moral position of the unions. The relationship between her and the Maritime Officer also enhances the righteousness and power of his position, as he oversees her actions.

A number of simple political implications can be derived from the operation of this form of masculinity. The first is generation of sympathy for the strike: respectable men are being attacked and now act to defend themselves. They are not a mob, they are not acting outside law and decency. The second is mobilisation: the cause is characterised as a worthy one. The third is the generation of hope: resolute, with right on its side, with constrained but ready strength, labour can withstand the forces arrayed against it.

In his study of masculine identity in the labour movement of this period, Michael Leach identifies the operation of ‘affective masculinism’. This refers to ‘direct appeals to masculine identity as a

11 Bull-ant, 11 September 1890.
device for the political mobilisation of men’. In the cartoons, these political implications are embedded in deeper certainties of gender identity. Following Leach, this grounds these political claims in ‘the realm of “natural” truths of biology or at least in the widely accepted truths of gender’. The visual of the cartoons enforces a position which links the cause of labour with what it is to be a ‘man’.

**SHORT, FOOLISH AND FAT: POLITICIANS, POLITICS AND EMPLOYERS**

The *Bull-ant* presented two key enemies during the period of the strike: Duncan Gillies, Premier of Victoria (Figure 4), and the Employers’ Association (Figure 6). These two figures are most commonly presented in a binary relation with the figure of labour. In this they both serve a particular rhetorical purpose. They act as the point against which resolute and righteous labour can be contrasted. The sloth of Gillies and the Employers’ Association contrasts with the fit maritime officers, whose clean-cut uniforms lack plumage, sashes, buttons and medals. They provide a contrast with the masculinity outlined above, leaving the viewer with the constrained choice between binary opposites.

Duncan Gilles was Premier of Victoria between 1886 and 1890. A Scot by birth, he came to the Victorian goldfields in 1852, where he had success as a miner and rose to prominence as an advocate of miners’ causes. He entered the Legislative Assembly as the member for Ballarat West in 1860. His early radicalism, however, faded. Losing Ballarat West, he drifted towards the conservatives, and was subsequently returned to various parliamentary seats. Gillies became Premier following the departure of the conservative James Service. Due to difficulties in securing support from independents, Service had formed a Ministry in 1883 with his old adversary, the Liberal Graham Berry. Gillies, along with Alfred Deakin from the Liberal side, succeeded Service and Berry at the head of the coalition ministry in 1886. Gillies was not blessed with expert skills in administration, and, swimming with the tide of the speculative boom of the 1880s, suffered politically and personally when it turned. The crash, and his handling of the maritime strike, led to the ministry’s loss of a confidence motion in October 1890.

The first depiction of Gillies is the most polite (Figure 4). His body is only slightly distorted – the head slightly larger than proportion would dictate. He wears the top hat and tails of the upper class and holds before himself a marionette soldier. The ridicule resides in the caption: ‘Mr. Gillies did not call out the cadet corps – he wishes to reserve those regiments for his own protection’. The image reflects the sentiment, as Gillies hides behind the toy soldier – a cadet rather than a militiaman. It was in the centrefold of the same week’s edition that Gillies really

---

13 ibid., 65-6.
14 ibid., 71.
16 *Bull-ant*, 4 September 1890.
received the rough treatment, treatment that was then maintained throughout the duration of the strike. Gillies is portrayed astride the goat of political power. A vast gut and a double chin distort his figure. He is clothed in military dress that evokes European monarchy, and waves a feather duster at the union wall. On his lapel is a badge ‘1st for Cheek’. Gillies is both grotesque and impotent. His body stands in contrast to the masculinity imbedded in the representations of the labour man. His distorted form evokes sloth, idleness and debauchery. It is an unnatural figure, and serves to de-legitimise his actions and his power. Gillies’ sword rests with the goat’s leg wrapped around it, hamstringing any attempted action. Yet it is not just the particular politician who suffers under a malicious pen, but political power itself that is cast as worthy of ridicule. The feather duster is labelled ‘Proclamation’, casting political power as naught but empty words.

The treatment of Gillies was more than a lampoon of a particular political leader. First, it reflected the contempt held by labour for the role government played in the strike. Across the Australian colonies government professed its neutrality, but in almost all matters of importance it then sided with capital. In both New South Wales and Queensland, special constables were sworn-in. In Queensland a number of prominent unionists were sentenced to imprisonment with hard labour. In Victoria the militia was called out. (The actions of the Victorian government will be discussed below.) Secondly, the Bull-ant’s depiction of Gillies sitting on his goat establishes a dichotomy between industrial power and political power. Labour’s strength was shown as lying in its affiliation to the Trades’ Hall, in unity and in strike, while Gillies’ strength was shown as being no strength at all. The weapons of Labour contrast with the foolish goat of the short and fat Gillies. This disdain for political power provided support for, and encouraged belief in, an industrial rather than political resolution of the dispute.

The second key enemy is the Employers’ Union or Association. It is important to note the particular significance of the Employers’ Union in the strike, and to highlight the distinction between Chambers of Commerce or Industry on the one hand and the Employers’ Union on the other. Whereas the former were the traditional organisations for merchants or factory owners, and fulfilled a number of functions, the latter were new organisations, formed in the lead-up to the strike. Stuart Svensen notes that the new organizations ‘had a single purpose: to combat and ultimately defeat organised labour’. As such, they were a natural target for the Bull-ant. The first depiction of them is in ‘Not to be extinguished’ (Figure 3). A small man – representing the employers – is dressed in top hat and tails, holding a large snuffer which is to be used on the demands presented by the Unions. Seen in contrast to the Trades’ Hall and the Maritime Officer, whom he is forced to gaze up to, the employer is clumsy and his weapon lacks credibility next to the sword of strike. In

17 Ibid.
19 Svensen, The Sinews of War, 48.
the next two representations, the Employers’ Association is again represented with an unnatural body (Figure 6). In ‘Peace(?)’ the employers are depicted as a huge man, clad in chain mail and plumage which evokes the imperial uniform of Gillies. Extremely small, dressed in traditional Greek clothing, and under his thumb is the squire to capital – black-leg labour. Three weeks later, the employers have shrunk very small – in contrast to labour’s height – but the generous girth is retained.

The Bull-ant did not employ an icon to represent the generic capitalist. While the Employers’ Association figure does resemble later depictions of Mr Fat, the Employers’ Association is always labelled as such – referring to the specific institution. Its depiction also lacks the malice which we see in later Mr Fats (for an example see Figure 7, from 1906). In the Bull-ant, the Employers are to be laughed at; they are ridiculous rather than malevolent.

That Gillies should have borne the brunt of the Bull-ant’s assault on politicians begs the question: why him alone? The most infamous words spoken in Melbourne during the strike were not those of Gillies but rather of Colonel Tom Price, Commander of the Victorian Mounted Rifles. On 30 August, by one of many accounts, he addressed his men as follows:

> You will each be supplied with forty rounds of ammunition – leaden bullets – and if the order is given to fire don’t let me see one rifle pointed up in the air. Fire low and lay them out – lay the disturbers of law and order out so that the duty will not have to again be performed.20

Price is subjected to one caricature (Figure 8), but is treated with softer gloves than Gillies. Indeed on 2 October Gillies is presented as directing the troops in an image labelled ‘Fire Low – and lay them out’, while Price and conservative leader J.B. Patterson are consigned to the background.

While it is the case that the soldier was following the orders of his political masters, Alfred Deakin, not Gillies, was the politician to whom the decision has been attributed. His biographer, J.A. La Nauze, writes that ‘the responsibility for calling out troops was the cabinet’s, but if it fell more on one man than another it was Deakin’s’. 21 As Chief Secretary Deakin was in ministerial control of the police, and, in the absence at the time of the Attorney-General, he had responsibility for the legality of the action. He was the principal respondent to questions regarding the matter in Parliament. Yet at no time during the strike was Deakin depicted. Deakin was not a regular target of the Bull-ant, but he did not always escape notice. Soon after the strike, the Gillies Ministry – the product of a coalition between Gillies and Deakin – was preparing to face the want-of-confidence motion which was to defeat the Government and install James Munro as Premier. At that time we see Deakin depicted as Gillies’ clerk, wearing the dark glasses of a blind man, a common device of the time

---

20 This version of the speech is from the Alexandra and Yea Standard, quoted in ibid., 129. This version was commonly held to be what was said but Price’s words, including the famous line, were contested.

Deakin was certainly seen as a progressive politician. This goes some way toward explaining his absence. An examination of his statements during the strike also sheds some light on the matter.

On 3 September the *Argus* reported Deakin’s response in Parliament to a number of questions regarding the strike, the calling out of troops, and posting of proclamations calling for the keeping of the peace:

During the present industrial struggle, when there were large gatherings and much excitement, exceptional opportunities might be presented to the members of the criminal class of carrying on their war against society and they must be kept in check at all hazards. The question was whether the city was subject to mob law, or whether it was to be governed by magistrates supporting law and order … The proclamation … [is] directed against the dishonest, the cowardly and the lawless, and it would be found to have had the desired effect.22

Deakin’s rhetoric throughout the strike centred on this idea of the ‘mob’. He held a genuine fear that the criminal element of Melbourne’s working class would rise up under cover of the darkness afforded by the coal boycott. He told Cabinet, ‘what we have done may save the city from disorder, and riot, and pillage’.23 Deakin’s establishment of order as opposed to the mob parallels the binaries established in the *Bull-ant*’s imagery. The *Bull-ant* provides labour with resolve, righteousness and reason. It places labour in a position of moral authority. It contrasts labour with figures who lack self-control, who are linked with violence, and who are essentially self-interested. Deakin positions himself in the same fashion. While one should be wary of ascribing too great an importance to this point, it is worthy of note given that the *Bull-ant* left Deakin, and his role in the strike, untouched. The *Bull-ant* papered over strains between liberalism, for which Deakin was a great champion, and the emerging class-based politics. As Stuart Macintyre notes, the strike ‘marks the point from which liberalism, as an ideology, a social movement and a political practice was increasingly unable to contain the claims of class’.24

**Liberty and Revolution**

In ‘Not to be Extinguished’, Unity wears the Phrygian cap, a famous symbol of liberty from the French revolution. Two weeks later, the *Bull-ant* again represents Trades’ Hall as a woman, and the evocation of revolutionary France is even more striking, as this comparison with Delacroix’s famous image of liberty demonstrates (Figure 10).

The Phrygian cap, or *bonnet rouge*, was popularly understood as a symbol of liberty with roots stretching back into antiquity. In 1792, the newspaper *Revolutions de Paris* noted that the Parisian masses ‘have been told that the woollen bonnet was, in Greece and in Rome, the

---

22 *Argus*, 3 September 1890, 9.
24 Macintyre, ‘“The Blessed Reign of Mobocracy”’, 59.
Picturing the Maritime Strike

emblem of freedom from all servitude and the symbol of deliverance of all enemies of despotism. The symbolic power of the cap can be traced to the practice whereby freed Roman slaves donned it to indicate their liberty. At mass protests the cap was often to be seen held aloft on a pike. It has been present in many allegorical depictions of the figure of liberty.

The symbolic power of the cap was not limited to France. In England, it became one of the most powerful symbols of popular radicalism, achieving such prominence that it was banned under the notorious Six Acts of November 1819. The cap found its way onto the card of the National Charter Association. Perhaps this is one of the ways by which the cap came to Australia. Robin Gollan has remarked that the ’extensive migration into Australia in the [eighteen] forties and the flood of the fifties sprang from a Britain in which chartism was the mass protest of the working and lower middle classes against the intolerable conditions of early industrialism’, while Brian Fitzpatrick has noted that ‘Australia inherited immediately, by way of the emigrant Chartists and unionists who came to the gold colonies, an impulse to unionism which has long been dormant in England’. 

In representation, the cap was generally depicted on the head of a woman. This woman might variously be Liberty, Marianne or Britannia. Maurice Agulhon writes that ‘the woman in the red cap, symbol first of the liberal revolution, then of republicanism at the beginning of the 19th century, became by imperceptible degrees, one of the possible symbols of social revolution at the end of the 19th century.’ But in relation to changes in the visual language of the politics of labour from the nineteenth to the twentieth century, Eric Hobsbawm has noted that the role of this female figure ‘diminished sharply with the transition from the democratic-plebeian revolutions of the nineteenth century to the proletarian and socialist movements of the twentieth’. The Bull-ant’s imagery stands with feet in both camps.

The visual language of the Bull-ant draws from and evokes democratic-plebian revolution. As Frank Bongiorno notes, colonial ‘Victorian working-class political activity was strongly influenced by labour’s involvement with the colony’s liberal tradition’.

26 ibid., 113.
27 ibid., 115.
29 Fitzpatrick, Short History of the Australian Labor Movement, 81.
33 Frank Bongiorno, The People’s Party: Victorian Labor and the Radical Tradition, 1875-1914
respectable masculinity which characterises labour lends strength to this reading. The masculinity which characterises how labour is portrayed, situates labour as the natural ally – or the most advanced form – of progressive liberal politics. As well as going someway to explaining the treatment of Deakin as discussed above, the evocation of plebeian radicalism in the visual language supports Bongiorno’s thesis.

In the dress of the enemies of labour we see these links to progressive liberalism further emphasised. The dress of Gillies and of the Employers’ Association is generally of a military nature. In Figure 4, three of the depictions of Gillies show uniforms which, although different in detail, are common in type. All three evoke the impractical, ceremonial garb of the monarchical regimes of Europe. The immediate contrast of the snappy, practical uniform of the mercantile marine is overlaid with the connotation of the irrational excess of such regimes. Again a simple binary is established: this connotation stands in opposition to the wise, reasoned dignity ascribed to labour. Furthermore, it evokes the ancien régime – the forces which have arrayed themselves against progress. Labour is thereby positioned as part of progressive liberalism.

Yet, as noted, the Bull-ant eschewed political solutions for industrial ones. While it certainly did not have sophisticated revolutionary politics, the Bull-ant did present hope through direct action rather than legislative solution. This stands in contrast to how hope was characterised only a few years later. In the Commonweal and Workers’ Advocate, the organ of the Political Progressive League, the first form taken by the Labor Party in Victoria, a very different model of salvation for working people is presented.

In ‘Clear the Way! It is coming! It is coming!’ (Figure 11), Socialism is a young man, riding a chariot labelled ‘Legislation’. His horses are ‘Organisation’ and ‘Agitation’. Before him runs a Cherub carrying a banner: ‘The Religion of Christ and Humanity’. Before the Cherub flee the money-lender, the capitalist, the priest and an assortment of expected targets. The Bull-ant’s disdain for parliamentary solutions has rapidly been converted to socialism through enlightened legislation. Hope in this image does not stem from industrial strength. The Bull-ant’s focus on direct action does not return in Melbourne’s leftist imagery until the turn of the century.

**STRUGGLE AND SILENCE**

The strike reached its height in September, but ‘as October wore on, and funds ran low, the union resistance crumbled’. The last union to succumb was that of the Newcastle coal miners, who returned to the pits on 5 November. Over this period an examination of the centrefolds of the Bull-ant reveals a shift from resolution to bravado, as the violence in the images escalates.

In ‘Peace(?)’ (Figure 6) the nature of the struggle is clearly spelt out. The bulbous figure of the Employers’ Association holds aloft on the point

---

of his sword a manifesto, whose text reads ‘See you D__D first!!’ The stakes are made clear. There will be no peace until one side is lying prostrate at the other’s feet. The following week, we are shown labour ready for action (Figure 12). In ‘Let Loose the Dogs of War’ (25 September 1890) the Bull-ant shifts the posture from a resolute, back-foot position to one where unions are straining to be released so they can fight. The Dogs of War are the affiliated unions, who strain at the leash held in by the Trades’ Hall, who again is a robed woman. Her pose is highly active, her stance strong – knee jutting forward, arm cast up above her head. Her face is masculine in aspect, on her head is the bonnet rouge. Her hand holds a twig from an olive branch. The caption below reads: ‘Trades’ Hall – Again, which is it to be, Peace or War’. Her face, stance and raised arm suggest she is about to cast the olive branch to the ground. She looks toward the armoured, but small, figure of the Employers’ Association. He stands behind a wall of bags, stuffed not with sand but with pounds, shillings and pence. In his hand is a bomb – black leg labour. The title of the image calls for a violent remedy: that the bomb is lit forces Trades’ Hall’s hand.

The following week the centrefold is a farcical depiction of Gillies, Price and the militia employing Mexican military tactics (Figure 8). It is the week after, in ‘Toe the Scratch’ (9 October), that the strike is brought to a head (Figure 13). Two boxers stand in the ‘conference’ ring – referring to the contemporary conference between the warring parties. In the caption, the Employers’ Association speaks to the Trade Unions: ‘Here, tie your hands behind you with this. And I’ll fight you’. He offers a ribbon labelled ‘Employers’ Manifesto’ to the figure of labour. Labour is represented as a heroic masculine figure – the proportions of his thighs matched only the size of his fists. His physical vigour is greater than any of the previous depictions. His face is youthful, with a small beard growing on his chin. He presents a substantial contrast to the figures of August and early September. Consider the old face in the union wall (Figure 2) or uniformed maritime officer (Figure 1). Instead the viewer is offered a bull neck and muscle-laden bare arms. Rather than wisdom and poise, here labour is raw strength.

The sign in the background labels the event: ‘Great Boxing Contest: Idleness v. Industry. To a finish’. The images tell the reader the trickery of the employer will be overcome, and the outcome is inevitable. A fist that big cannot but deliver a knockout punch. The ‘Great Contest’ was, however, already well towards its resolution. At this time it was reported that 60 per cent of steam company ships were operating, and as the month wore on there were increasing numbers of defections from the union ranks. The heroic, youthful vigour rings hollow – the boxer’s physicality can be better seen as bravado than as a real belief in labour’s triumph. The overt violence does not offer the same reassurance provided by the righteous and resolute masculinity. The gloves do not provide the

---

35 Bull-ant, 18 September 1890.
36 Bull-ant, 9 October 1890.
37 Svensen, The Sinews of War, 211.
purity and measured strength offered by Unity’s sword in ‘Not to be Extinguished’ (Figure 3). Actual violence, rather than the threat of violence, undermines the moral position which has been established.

The following week, the centrefold is entitled ‘I’m Here Dear Boy’. Gillies and Henry Parkes, the Premier of New South Wales who played a similar role to Gillies during the strike, are seen colluding with one another, armed to the teeth, dressed in full ceremonial military pomp. Parkes is indicating he is about to turn his attention to Newcastle – where the miners held out to the last. After this image, the Bull-ant produces no more cartoons on the Maritime strike. Defeat is only represented through silence. That the representations of the strike should end with Gillies and Parkes, not with the Employers’ Association, is probably coincidence. It is, however, historically satisfying. It points towards a labour movement which sees the collusion between capital and the state in the strike leaving it with no choice but to embrace parliamentary politics and state intervention as its solution. On the other hand, the visual imagery produced by labour only rarely regained the same air of martial confidence.

CONCLUSION

The imagery of the Bull-ant represents a strident high point in representations of labour. Its martial tone and resolute masculinity exude a confidence which the defeats of the early 1890s strip from the movement. The images offer not just strength to win, but through careful construction, a tone is established which gives labour a moral strength. Simple binaries are created to support this. Rational labour is contrasted with the irrational and foolish other. Respectability is compared with the mob. Labour is established as a progressive force in society – its enemies as retrograde, throwbacks to the ancien régime. The borrowing of visual language from the liberal revolutionary tradition emphasises this point. It is only when defeat is inevitable that the representations fall away from this moral position to rely more heavily on offensive violence – and by this time the situation had evolved such that defeat was inevitable. This defeat taught a lesson which saw labour, in the decade to come, turned onto a different, parliamentary track.

University of Melbourne

---

38 Bull-ant, 16 October 1890.
Figure 1 ‘Just Before the Battle’ 21 August 1890.
Figure 2 Detail, ‘Gillies on the Warpath’ 4 September 1890.
Figure 3 Detail, ‘Not to be Extinguished’ 11 September 1890.
Figure 4 Clockwise: Detail ‘Some Gas Strike Items’ 4 September 1890, Detail ‘Gillies on the Warpath’ 4 September 1890, Detail ‘I’m here dear boy’ 16 October 1890, Detail ‘Fire Low—and lay them out!’ 2 October 1890.
Figure 6 Detail ‘Peace (?)’ 18 September 1890, ‘Toe the Scratch’ 9 October 1890.

Figure 7 ‘Vote for Fat and he’ll do the rest’, *Labor Call*, 29 November 1906.
Figure 8 “Fire Low Price” Bull-ant 4 September 1890, “Fire Low—and lay them out” 2 October 1890.

Figure 9 ‘A New Ministerial Move’”30 October 1890.
Picturing the Maritime Strike

Figure 10 Detail, ‘Not to be Extinguished’ 11 September 1890, Detail, Delacroix’s ‘The Barricade’ 1830, Detail, ‘Let loose the Dogs of War’ 25 September 1890.

Figure 11 ‘Clear the Way! It is Coming! It is Coming!’ Commonweal and Workers’ Advocate 12 November 1892.
Figure 12 Detail ‘Let Loose the Dogs of War’, 25 September 1890.

Figure 13 ‘Toe the Scratch’, 9 October 1890.