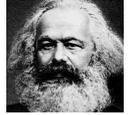


Whitlam sacking 1975

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Strike Fraser Out!

The labour movement campaign against the blocking of supply and the sacking of the Whitlam Government, October-December 1975

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The struggle of people against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting. --

Milan Kundera

(This is a slightly shortened version of an essay originally written for an undergraduate history subject at Queensland University.)

For the past twenty years, the Constitutional Crisis of 1975 has almost always been discussed in constitutional and parliamentary terms. Did (or should) the Senate have the power to defer a money bill? What should the Governor-General have done? And should the head of states powers be changed, or even eliminated? Paul Kellys recent magnum opus, *November 1975*, focuses almost exclusively on three actors, Whitlam, Fraser and Kerr, explicitly arguing that "the story can only be understood in terms of the personal relationships between the principals, in addition to the political and constitutional dynamics."

Yet as soon as the Liberals blocked supply, there was a "spontaneous" eruption of activity from the labour movement, including strikes and large, militant demonstrations. Frasers move was not just seen as an attack on parliamentary conventions, but as an attack on the wider working class and the labour movement as well. So profound was the working class reaction that the *National Times* newspaper was moved to comment, "Mr Fraser may make it impossible for a conservative party to govern in Australia with any measure of co-operation from the unions." When the Whitlam Government was sacked by Sir John Kerr, tens of thousands of workers simply walked out on strike and the ACTU came under pressure to call a general strike.

This struggle by working class Australians has been all but written out of history. The books written in the immediate aftermath by political journalists typically mention massive demonstrations and large, passionate election meetings, but say little or nothing about trade union action. When the journalist Paul Kelly rewrote his account, the modest discussion of Labors election campaign, with its large, angry meetings and rallies, almost entirely disappeared. Even more remarkable is the exclusion of this struggle from just about every trade union history that covers 1975. The most generous response is to be found in Jim Hagens *History of the A.C.T.U.* His only comment on a movement that climaxed with half a million workers on strike in Melbourne and Brisbane is: "No general industrial upheaval followed [Whitlams sacking] and industrial action by individual unions was slight. There were massive demonstrations and rallies."

This silence reflects the apparent avoidance of any serious post-mortem after Labors defeat at the polls. Inside the Labor Party, the Governments supposed attempt to do "too much, too soon" was "the most common and most shallow verdict on the Whitlam Government". Amongst the Labor and trade union left, the vicious media campaign against Whitlam, conspiracies by the CIA, Whitlams failure to consult, and the 25% tariff cut which led to thousands of job losses, were all emphasised. Very few sought to ask whether or not the working class upsurge of October and November might have stopped Frasers attack had things been done differently. Indeed, the scale of the Labor Partys defeat on 13 December led many to conclude that the campaign hadnt mattered at all. I will present a very different point of view.

It seemed like a good idea at the time

When Malcolm Fraser made his move to bring down the Whitlam Government, the Opposition parties were in an extraordinarily strong position. Internally, the Government was torn by deep conflicts over policy and personnel and three senior Ministers had been sacked since June in controversial circumstances. Externally, it was deeply unpopular: opinion polls put it 15-20% behind, and in June 1975, a by-election for the Tasmanian seat of Bass had seen a swing against it of historic proportions 17%. In his report on the Bass disaster, Labors Don Grimes described the Government as "disturbingly unpopular" amongst the working class. There was disillusionment with, and even bitter hostility towards, the Labor Government amongst its most loyal supporters in the trade union movement. All this was a far cry from the euphoria that surrounded Whitlams election in December 1972. After a year of wild boom, in 1973, Australia was plunged into the most severe economic crisis since the Great Depression in late 1974. As profits slumped, mass sackings followed, factory closures were threatened and unemployment lurched towards 5%. Despite rising unemployment, workers struck to defend real wages. The Labor Governments economic policy swung from expansion to attempts to rein in the ballooning deficit. In late 1974, the government lurched sharply to the right, declaring that healthy profits were the key to recovery, and attacking "dole bludgers", wage rises and militant unions. By early 1975, both major classes business and the working class were angry at the government. On top of this, a vicious media campaign had either manufactured or discovered enough scandals to drive all but the most committed from supporting the government. The economic crisis also encouraged a new hardness within the Liberal Party. Former Liberal "dry" John Hyde told of a "Whitlam enrolment" in the party:

a new breed of more politically ruthless individuals organised a strong power base by stacking branches in key electorates, believing that the older Party hands such as himself, Chaney, Freeth, Withers and Lathby were either selling out to Canberra or not sufficiently ruthless to oppose Canberra's "centralism".

This was the era of the laughably named "Workers Party", run by millionaires John Singleton and Sinclair Hill, that demanded a flat rate of income tax, deregulation, and a other proposals that would subsequently be identified with the New Right. It is also the environment in which Malcolm Fraser rose to the leadership of the Liberal Party. Fraser had publicly identified himself with the radical individualism of Ayn Rand, and a pessimism that emphasised national sacrifice, summed up in the phrase: "Life wasnt meant to be easy." He also had a reputation for ruthlessness, having helped destroy the Prime Ministership of John Gorton. Nearly two months after Treasurer Bill Hayden brought down his first Budget, Fraser announced that the Opposition would refuse to pass the Appropriation Bills in the Senate. They would block supply until the unpopular government of Gough Whitlam resigned and went to the polls in an election the Coalition felt it simply couldnt lose.

The trade union movement had different ideas. On Thursday 16 October, the day the Senate formally voted to defer the Budget, several thousand "public servants and other unionists" rallied outside Parliament House, Canberra, in the first of many large and angry rallies against the Oppositions bid for power. Friday 17th saw a mass protest rally of at least 5000 people in Brisbane, with building workers

walking off city construction sites to attend. In Hobart, thousands of Labor supporters turned up to a Liberal-called rally to shout Malcolm Fraser down. In Melbourne, members of 24 unions went on strike. The Sydney and Wollongong water fronts lay idle and members of the Amalgamated Metal Workers Union walked off the job in three States, with 30 metal trades workplaces on strike in Melbourne, including the 1400-strong naval dockyard.

These hurriedly-called protests soon gave way to even bigger and more deliberate rallies and stopwork actions that reached all corners of the country. In Melbourne, 15,000 people rallied in the city in defence of the Government on Monday 20th. In the Westernport industrial area, some 60km from Melbourne, the inter-union area committee organised a 24 hr strike for the day. Ten thousand mostly trade unionists stopped work and rallied in Sydney on Friday 24 October, despite pouring rain, to listen to speeches by ACTU President Bob Hawke and Gough Whitlam. Adelaide saw two major rallies that week. On Monday, 7000 workers from factories, building sites and offices rallied in Victoria Square. Workers from Islington Rail Workshops stopped and rail and metal worker unions encouraged workers to go to the rally. On Saturday 25th, there was also a march of between 6000 and 8000 organised by the ALP. In Hobart, 2000 rallied on Tuesday 21st. Wednesday 22nd saw Pt Kembla unions organise a car cavalcade to Canberra with the Port of Wollongong closing down when waterside workers, seamen, other maritime workers and metal and building trades walked off the job. The same day the Fremantle waterfront stopped for 24 hours with wharfies voting for a voluntary \$10 a head levy for ALP election funds. In Perth on Friday 24th, 5000 mostly unionists packed Perth Town Hall and overflowed into the street; police had refused permission for a Forrest Place meeting, the normal site of such rallies. Brewery workers stopped work and marched from the Swan Brewery to the Town Hall while 2000 workers at Midland Railway Workshops stopped for the afternoon. Townsville's three meatworks stopped for the day on October 24, while railworkers and other industries stopped for two hours. Over 2000 attended a rally.

When the Liberal Party did decide to organise its own rally, outside Parliament House, Canberra, on Tuesday 21 October, the result was humiliation for the Opposition leader. About 4000 people gathered, but Labor supporters outnumbered Liberals, with many workers travelling up from Wollongong. Fraser was forced to end his "speech" after seven minutes and retreat into Parliament House. Whitlam triumphantly commented that it was the first time he had known a party to organise a political meeting at which its leader was howled down and had to vacate the field.

Within nine days, at least 50,000 workers had attended rallies in defence of the Whitlam government and perhaps 100,000, perhaps many more, had taken strike action and lost wages some walking out twice. Anyone who has ever laboured to organise industrial or political action will recognise just how extraordinary this response was. The rallies were repeatedly compared with the Vietnam moratoriums (which were bigger); but it had required years of argument, propaganda, and countless smaller protests and civil disobedience actions before the moratoriums had been possible.

Impact of the movement

This movement in defence of the Government had, I believe, a major impact on the political rivals in this struggle; hardening the will to resist amongst the Labor parliamentary caucus and helping turn public opinion sharply against the Liberals, accentuating their internal differences.

The extreme divisions within the Labor Party parliamentary caucus were put aside almost immediately. This was not simply a case of Labor MPs banding together because they were under attack indeed the day Fraser announced the blocking of Supply, Labor Senators Wheeldon and Wreidt moved in caucus that Whitlam immediately advise the Governor-General to grant a double dissolution. They gained somewhere between a quarter and a third of the vote. I would argue that the impact of the strikes and rallies was to confront Labor MPs with a strategy of resistance run, to a considerable extent, by forces outside the confines of parliament the unions and subsequently the Labor Party state branches. To abandon such a

movement and agree to an election would have angered and demoralised Labors supporters, and guaranteed not only an electoral debacle, but bitter recriminations for many years.

In the area of public opinion, Malcolm Fraser suffered a major and almost immediate setback, one that was totally unexpected. By 19 October just four days after Frasers announcement the shadow cabinet was being described as "worried" by the public response, and meeting specifically to discuss what to do. The next day, journalist Laurie Oakes was asked to act as a go-between and approach the Labor Party about a possible half-Senate election compromise. Liberal Party research had earlier predicted that no more than 3.5% of intended Liberal voters would switch to Labor if the Budget was blocked. However a Herald/Age Saulwick Poll, taken in the capital cities, Canberra and Newcastle, showed 70% wanting the Senate to pass Supply, including 41% of people who voted Liberal at the last election. By early November, the Labor Party had gained 6% in the Gallup Poll, to be at 44%, compared with 48% for the Opposition (down 7%). The same poll showed a sharp jump in Whitlams approval rating to 42% compared with 32% in August, while Frasers had slumped from 64% in July to just 34% in November. In October alone, Whitlams approval rating had jumped 5% while Frasers had fallen 20%. A Morgan Gallup Poll taken on 8 November, just three days before Whitlam was dismissed, showed the Opposition, with 46% of the vote, behind Labor for the first time on 47%. It was a political disaster.

What were the causes of this? It certainly owed nothing to the efforts of the media. The day they reported Frasers decision to block Supply almost every single metropolitan daily newspaper ran a special editorial, condemning the Governments economic management as disastrous, demanding it resign, and explicitly backing the Oppositions move. Neither could the popular backlash owe anything to the popularity of the Government itself. After analysing opinion poll data from 8 November for *The Bulletin*, David Marr concluded, "Most of the swing back to Labor is, in fact, the firming of its traditional support among tradesmen, semi- and unskilled workers." A Herald/Age Saulwick poll, taken in the capital cities on 25-26 October, showed that blue collar approval of Whitlam was disproportionately high (51% against 28% amongst white collar voters), as was approval of Whitlam amongst those with trade qualifications (48%) or primary education only (52%). Those intending to vote Labor in the event of a half-Senate election were also disproportionately blue collar (61.2% to 34.9% white collar).

I would conclude from this that the size and strength of the trade union response galvanised blue collar (and wider working class) opinion behind the Government, and did so because it forced into the public arena a range of issues that would otherwise have been buried. While Whitlam was focusing on the constitution and parliamentary convention, trade union speakers pointed out the *class* threat posed by Frasers bid for power. There were issues of material well-being at stake Fraser would attack trade union rights and wages, he would savagely cut Government spending on essential social services, perhaps even Medibank. There was fear of what he represented a rich and arrogant grazier from the traditional elite with no knowledge of, or sympathy for, ordinary workers, born with a silver spoon in his mouth and a silver dagger in his hand, as Bob Hawke put it. There was also a sense of outrage at the Liberals apparent belief that workers were simply not allowed to elect a Labor Government, even a competent one. They had never accepted Labors victory in 1972, had forced it to the polls by voting down money bills in the Senate in 1974, had replaced one retiring and one dead Labor Senator with non-Labor appointees in breach of all past convention, and were now trying to drive the elected government from office. On top of all this was Frasers reputation for ruthlessness, already seen in the way he helped destroy the leaderships of Gorton and Snedden. What would this mean for workers if he became Prime Minister?

A significant part of the Liberal middle class vote also turned against Fraser, with 41% of previous Liberal voters opposed to the blocking of Supply. *The Bulletin* pointed to a dramatic recovery in Labor support amongst the tertiary-educated. To gain some insight into the possible reasons for this, it is instructive to read through the thousand-odd telegrams and letters that poured into the office of Liberal Senator Alan Missen in late October and early November 1975. Missen had openly opposed the blocking of Supply, and

with the Liberals needing the vote of every one of their Senators to sustain it, he became a magnet for the fears of many small business people and individual Liberal voters and party members who implored him to cross the floor. The most common concern was for the rules of parliamentary democracy; some were fearful of violence. A few mentioned financial problems caused by the Supply crisis. I would argue that the willingness of the labour movement to fight Frasers bid for power was a significant factor in arousing this fear of confrontation, and it was Fraser they blamed because he had "broken the rules" and caused the crisis.

Further evidence of the impact of the labour movement campaign can be found by in the changing tone of the *Sydney Morning Herald's* editorials. The paper was viciously anti-Labor. Its editorial of 16 October said Labor had:

brought the Australian economy to a state of near-paralysis, with commercial confidence destroyed, plans for expansion laid aside, businesses large and small forced to give up altogether or retrench their staffs drastically, with whole industries doubtful of their future and with unemployment rising to frightening levels.

Frasers decision to block Supply was "proper and responsible" and the paper confidently believed that, "There can be few thoughtful Australians who would deny that it is time for a change." By Saturday 18th it was urging its readers to "Lets keep cool", conveniently forgetting its own inflammatory agitation, and canvassed a backdown by Fraser as one way out of the crisis. Mondays editorial, under the heading "Alarums and excursions" lectured Labor in particular on the need to stop whipping things up, attacked Hawke and McClelland for threatening strikes, and Wheeldon for comparing the situation to Spain in the 1930s. There was not a line about the duty of the Government to resign. The following day, the day it reported the first mass rally in Melbourne, the editor gave half the editorial page to Professor Julius Stone to propose a possible compromise between Whitlam and Fraser.

This political retreat did not last. On the following Monday, with the first round of major rallies over and strike action wound back, it sharply returned to vicious attacks on Labor. The tone is one of frustration, berating the Opposition for focusing on peripheral issues, such as scandals, rather than hammering away at Labors economic crimes. On 25 October, the papers editorialist lamented that the government, by its superior propaganda, had made Whitlam look as if he were the injured party. The editorial was headed "Topsyturvydom", a word that perfectly sums up the Liberal political universe at that stage. For its part, the Melbourne *Herald*, ignoring its own support for Frasers move, lamented in its editorial of 30 October that "an ill-advised, ill-planned withholding of Supply has again pushed into support of the Whitlam government many people, including unionists, who would have voted it out." None of these retreats would have happened without tens of thousands of trade unionists and labour supporters taking action.

Could the workers have stopped Fraser?

Had the trade union mobilisation against Fraser been sustained, or better, deepened, the Liberal Partys unity behind Fraser would almost certainly have cracked. It didnt have to crack very far; only one Liberal senator needed to cross the floor for Supply to be passed and the crisis ended. We now know that that was about to happen when Kerr intervened. The question is: could the labour movement have speeded up or intensified this "cracking open"?

Even before the final decision to block Supply was made, there were important sections of the Liberal Party opposed to taking this step. Journalist Paul Kelly reports that at the Liberal Federal Council meeting held over the weekend of 11-12 October, Victorian president Peter Hardie spoke firmly against it, arguing that it meant throwing away the political rule book and creating the danger it could happen to them in the future. "Finally," Kelly writes, "he warned that the move would create dangerous divisions within the community and was likely to provoke massive industrial unrest from the trade union movement." Kelly

reports these concerns being shared by Chris Puplick, president of the Young Liberals and prominent Victorian Liberal Beryl Beaurepaire. In a recent letter to me, Hardie, who is still active in Liberal politics, wrote:

Paul Kelly is substantially correct I envisaged massive unrest when the Government came to a halt I was apprehensive about unprecedented and, possibly, violent protests from a number of quarters politicians of all persuasions, unions, intellectuals and the general community it was clear that the unions would play a significant part but a substantial community uprising would be the dominant factor. The unions were more powerful then than now Commentators then and after spoke of civil commotion bordering on civil war. Anyone concerned with public life in Australia was apprehensive about the future.

Hardie believes his view was widely shared: "I had no opposition to my stance as far as the Victorian organization was concerned." In a brief telephone interview, the then Liberal Premier, Sir Rupert Hamer, said that he, and the Victorian Party, had always been against blocking Supply. Hardie continued:

The concern was widespread. People like the late Senator Missen echoed the worries, in particular, of "small l" Liberals. The business community feared a breakdown could affect transport, power and, possibly, create savage divisions in firms and corporations that had to that point enjoyed reasonable harmony in industrial relations.

A broadly similar position was taken by Sir John Gorton, then a backbench MHR, and Ian Macphee. Sir Thomas Playford, the legendary former Premier of South Australia had also warned that blocking Supply would mean the new Government being "greeted as an invading army by a hostile citizenry."

The massive and spontaneous labour movement mobilisation after the blocking of Supply represented the kind of popular unrest and opposition many Victorian Liberals feared. Had the strikes been sustained, or extended, these Liberal fears would have been intensified, had a wider influence, and possibly weakened Frasers position even more. They would almost certainly have aroused sections of business to pressure Fraser to relent. Edmund Rouse has given us an insight into such thinking. The Chairman of Examiner-Northern TV in Tasmania, later notorious for trying to bribe a State Labor MP, Rouse was fiercely anti-Labor. But in a letter to Fraser and Missen, he despaired of the Liberal Partys tactics in blocking Supply, and not "for the semi-hysterical reasons put out by the Prime Minister I do not understand the political benefits of taking those actions which have united the various factions of the Labour [sic] Party and the Unions as they have not been united since the euphoric days of 1972."

It was only Frasers ability to maintain discipline amongst his Senators that allowed him the time to get the Governor-General to sack Whitlam. Amongst the Senators who opposed the blocking of Supply, such as Alan Missen, that discipline was maintained by intimidation. A fracturing of Frasers support, especially in Victoria and South Australia where the party was most concerned about the union backlash, would have weakened the substance of that threat. As Fraser sank in the polls, and the crisis drifted on without resolution, Liberal Senate Whip, Reg Withers found it harder and harder to maintain the discipline of the wavering senators. "You'd just hope day after day you'd get through until the adjournment There were two Senators who told me they were prepared to go." Former Liberal Senator Neville Bonner claims that on November 11 he was about to cross the floor and help pass the Budget, believing many others would join him. "The ALP will never know how close it was to remaining in office." The decision was taken out of his hands.

Was a more powerful and sustained trade union response possible? Along with the enthusiasm of the rank and file for action, there was alarm at Frasers move amongst trade union leaders, and many drew the conclusion that national industrial action would be necessary to both resist Fraser and mobilise the rank and file. The NSW Plumbers Union asked the Labor Council to call on the ACTU to call a national protest;

as did the Labor Councils Building Trades Group. Even the right wing Labor Council itself asked the ACTU Executive to meet and consider national protest action. The Waterside Workers Federation Sydney Branch expressed alarm at "the apathy which appears to be penetrating the A.L.P. and trade union movement, particularly at leadership level, where well known and prominent people are talking about the inevitable defeat of the Labor Government." The South Australian United Trades and Labor Council and 50 Victorian union leaders also put out statements calling for the ACTU to act, and the Western Australian Trades and Labour Council asked Hawke to convene an emergency ACTU Executive.

A week into the crisis, on 23 October, the ACTU Executive held an emergency meeting. The result was a resolution that very firmly directed the trade union movement towards mobilising for an electoral campaign. After deploring the Opposition action, it asked unions to pledge financial support for any election campaign and to promise physical and personnel resources. At one point it raised the possibility of the ACTU deciding on "some selective with-holding of supply within the industrial movement" a phrase that made it sound as if Bob Hawke was threatening the Liberals with some kind of national strike. With any such decision requiring the support of state trades and labour councils and the Federal parliamentary leadership, the Liberals had little to fear from it.

The ACTU also decided to hold workplace meetings and meetings of delegates. In Brisbane 800 shop stewards, job delegates, ALP branch members and others heard Hawke deliver "a biting criticism of the development of Australian capitalism" to an enthusiastic audience, and then tell them to wait for any call for action to come from ALP leaders. In Sydney 600 job delegates met at the Sydney Town Hall on 30 October to again hear Bob Hawke and other union officials but were denied the right to debate. *Tribune* quotes one delegate as saying: "it seemed that if a delegate got up and said we should go back to the jobs and develop stopwork action, the Town Hall would have collapsed with shock". In Melbourne, which proved to be consistently the most militant capital city throughout the crisis, the ACTUs position was given a left wing spin by AMWU State Secretary, John Halfpenny, the most important union official in Australia after Hawke. The ACTU resolution was actually put to the meeting of 2,500 shop stewards in Melbourne's Festival Hall, with Halfpenny seconding it, and describing it as a guide to action in the workplaces. He called for intervention by workers on a grand scale, without restraint to "drive the Liberals into the political backwaters". *Tribune* did not go on to explain what the members of the audience were meant to do to realise this hope.

Rage against the coup

When Sir John Kerr sacked the Whitlam Government on 11 November, there was a widespread feeling of shock and anger. Within hours of the news leaking out, at around 2pm that day, there was extensive strike action by well organised workplaces and large and angry demonstrations in Canberra, Melbourne, Sydney, Adelaide and Perth. While ACTU president Bob Hawke appealed to unionists to "cool it", seamen walked off their ships in ports throughout the country and the union called an immediate national strike of its 6000 members. Melbourne's waterside workers "stormed off the job", and waterfront workshop workers and storemen followed. The Sydney and Wollongong wharves were also shut down with the Waterside Workers Federation calling a national, 24 hour strike, from midnight that night. Railway workers at the Eveleigh workshop in Sydney and the Cardiff workshop in Newcastle walked out. Other Newcastle walkoffs included the Floating Dock, Carrington slipways, Varleys, Machinery Overalls and the Gordon Ave bus depot. Four hundred meatworkers at Borthwicks in Brisbane walked off, and thousands struck on major construction sites around the country, with the Melbourne industry described as "hard hit". Large numbers of metal workers in Victoria, and some in other States downed tools. Miners at Mummorah State and Stockrington No. 2 mines in the NSW Northern District, and Nebo and Corrimall on the NSW South Coast stopped for 24 hours.

How many more workplaces walked out? The most impressive detail I could muster came from *Tribune*,

and Newcastle in particular, where the Communist Partys roots in the working class had perhaps declined less than elsewhere, meaning that industrial action was more likely to be documented. We know that many thousands more workers either simply left work as individuals (especially office workers), or took organised strike action that day from anecdotal evidence, stray comments in the newspapers, and from the strongly working class composition of the many large rallies held that afternoon. Most of the strikes we know about were unrecorded by the relevant unions, how many more were unreported even to them? I believe it is entirely reasonable to conclude that at least 50,000 workers walked out on strike that first day; and this may be a significant underestimate.

Well over 20,000 people rallied in the major capital cities that day, a remarkable number given that the first anyone knew of the sacking was at 2.05pm when Sir John Kerrs statement was released. Within minutes, hundreds of people had gathered outside Parliament House in Canberra to protest the dismissal; and by 4pm the number was 4000 as workers spontaneously left work. Melbournes rally was the largest, estimated by the newspapers at 8-10,000, while 3000 people in Sydney marched on Liberal Party headquarters, 3-400 gathered in Balmain, 1000 rallied in Brisbane, 300 in Adelaide and 3000 in Perth.

At the major capital city rallies that afternoon, there was an atmosphere of intense militancy, anger and bitterness. In Canberra, demonstrators carried improvised banners saying "Sir John Cur", "For Gods Sake Stop Raping Democracy" and "Suspend Fraser" beside a drawing of a gibbet. It was here that Whitlam made his famous speech, condemning Fraser as "Kerrs cur" and calling on Labor supporters to "Maintain your rage". Liberal front-bencher Jim Killen said it was the most extraordinary demonstration he had seen in 20 years in parliament. *The Age* described the mood as "viciously anti-Liberal". Frasers car was thumped and Andrew Peacock needed police to rescue him from "a hostile, jeering mob". The Melbourne rally was convened by the Amalgamated Metal Workers Union and marched on Government House. After a standoff with police at the gates, 1500 continued, marching on Liberal Party headquarters where windows were broken and a wild melee broke out between police and 1000 of the demonstrators. It is a measure of the bitterness of the moment that the Furnishing Trades Union was able to sustain a ban on replacing the Liberals windows, and they remained boarded up for some time. In Sydney, the Australian Union of Students and other unions called a rally in Chifley Square and had it advertised on radio 2JJ. Protesters carried placards saying "Stop work to stop Fraser", "Lest we forget democracy died today", "Sack Kerr, not Whitlam", "Who elected Kerr?" and "Sack Fraser, the Kerr-taker PM". They marched on Liberal Party headquarters and then Trades Hall, where an impromptu meeting passed a resolution calling on workers to press the ACTU, State Labor Councils and national unions "to call a national day of stoppages against the Kerr-Fraser forces, leading up to a general strike of all workers one week later." In Adelaide there were fights outside Liberal Party headquarters.

Tribune was the only publication to record something of the mood and the experience at well-organised workplaces that day. It reported that debates raged on Sydney building sites on the day of Whitlams sacking:

Workers from all unions on job sites came together to discuss what to do to express their anger. On one site, some workers argued that "We should cool it and stay on the job". But others argued "Hawke can go to hell. Workers have left things to parliament and look where that's got them. It's our democracy that's being destroyed and we must act.". The latter view predominated after a debate, by a big majority. Migrant workers voiced most strongly the need for action. It was decided to stop work, which they did immediately, along with many other building jobs."

The paper published an interview with Mike Jackson, secretary of the Combined Unions Committee at the Garden Island Dockyard.

Announcement of the Kerr business hit like a bombshell. There was spontaneous hostility and

amazement people wanted action. The call went up straight away for a nation-wide stoppage. It was not **whether** we were going to take action, but how quickly. The Shop Committee called an emergency meeting next morning [ie 12th.] and contacted other waterfront shops. Though some Shop Committee members were uncertain about how far people were prepared to go, the mass meeting decisions were unanimous. As we marched into Pitt Street we caught sight of the workers from Cockatoo Dock, who had also stopped work. You could hear the roar that went up from both groups all over town! The two marches joined together with seamen and office workers who swelled our ranks as we went. At Liberal Headquarters, officials refused to see a deputation from the march, so workers decided to march "on the citadel of Australian high finance and power", the Sydney Stock Exchange [where they briefly occupied the trading floor].

This was just one example of the strikes and militant demonstrations that erupted over the next few days as left wing unions called national strike action, and workplaces held mass meetings to stop work. On Wednesday 12 November in Brisbane, waterside workers, seamen, storemen and packers, meat workers, building workers, builders' labourers and some railway employees went on strike with many attending a rally of 3000 that marched 10 abreast through the city. A Liberal rally which would have clashed with the unionists rally was "postponed". A speaker told the crowd Whitlam would be speaking on Friday. "We want to stop the whole of the traffic, in the whole of the city for the whole of the day," he said. "Everyone stop work on Friday. The capitalists understand that language massed workers and missed profits." Parliament House Canberra saw an even bigger rally than the day before with 5000 people cheering Whitlam. Hundreds of people besieged him with money at one point, his pockets were bulging with five and 10-dollar bills. Such huge collections became a feature of Labor Party rallies as workers contributed in any way they could. The new Coalition ministers had to use private cars to get to Government House for their swearing-in because Commonwealth car drivers stopped work while the rally was on. There were rallies too in Melbourne, Perth, Darwin, Launceston, and other centres. 1500 workers at the Whyalla shipyard walked off. On Thursday, 2500 rallied in Newcastle, while that evening, 4000 gathered in the outer Sydney suburb of Liverpool to hear Whitlam. On Thursday 13th, about 600 demonstrators had marched on Rupert Murdoch's newspaper office in Sydney, blockaded trucks and prevented distribution of the afternoon paper, the *Daily Mirror*. It was the first of a long series of bitter struggles within and against the media over the reporting of the Whitlam government and the election campaign culminating in a strike of Murdoch journalists on December 8 in protest at their papers editorial policy.

A General Strike is put on the agenda

One of the first responses to the Kerr "coup" was a widespread call for national strike action in protest. It was so widespread that the official historian of the ACTU, Jim Hagan, describes it as, "The overwhelming question that faced the A.C.T.U. officers" who met with ALP leaders including Whitlam and Crean on the evening of November 11. So far as I can determine, the leadership of nearly every powerful and strategically important union in Australia called on the ACTU to call a national strike the Metal Workers Union, the FED&FA, the Building Workers Industrial Union, the Miners Federation, the Seamen and the Waterside Workers. The NSW State Secretary of the Railways Union, a right wing union in that State, said that feeling among rail unions was in favour of a national stoppage. The South Australian United Trades and Labor Council, the Newcastle Trades Hall Council and workers at many workplaces passed resolutions calling for a national stoppage, and some, mostly building sites, sent telegrams to the ACTU. A meeting of left Labor members of parliament met on the afternoon of November 11 and discussed the need to mobilise workers through a national strike. Some afterwards expressed disappointment that the ACTU had not gone ahead, that "Hawke had locked out the trade union movement".

ACTU president Bob Hawke set his face firmly against any national strike action from the very first. Hawke's first response, at a press conference in Melbourne about an hour after the dismissal, was to insist

that Whitlam had "no alternative but to accept this amazing decision". When got up to speak at the rally outside Parliament House on the afternoon of 11 November, having just flown from Melbourne with other trade union leaders, the crowd greeted him with a chant of, "We want a general strike when do we want it now!" Hawkes response was hostile: "I question the integrity of people presenting that point of view I have been going around Australia in the past month and I know that this is not what people want. They want stability and decency in government and we can provide that." Given that the people he had talked to in the past month had not imagined for a minute that the Governor-General would sack the Prime Minister, Hawkes response said more about his determination than his own integrity. According to his biographer, Blanche d'Alpuget, Hawke "was in dire fear that the emotional reaction to the Governments sacking could lead to riots." At a press conference he warned that,

A lot of people will want to move for a general strike, but I'm asking them not to. I'm aware that what has happened could unleash forces in Australia which we've never seen before. We are on the edge of something terrible happening. Only the conscription campaign in World War I can compare with the developments today We don't want to substitute violence in the streets for democracy.

These were his primary public arguments. Hawkes position was strengthened as a result of the emergency meeting of the Commonwealth Labour Advisory Committee held on the evening of November 11. In attendance were Whitlam, former Deputy Prime Minister Frank Crean, Hawke, ACTU Vice-Presidents John Ducker from the right NSW Labor Council and Jim Roulston from the left-wing Metal Workers Union, and Bill Richardson representing ACSPA. A few other union leaders and possibly representatives of the ALP Federal office were also present. I understand that there was a prolonged debate about calling national industrial action, with Jim Roulston from the Metal Workers Union and Bill Richardson from the white collar peak body ACSPA arguing in favour. How often this century have Labor Party and trade union leaders been obliged to discuss demands that they call a national strike?

In the end, the CLAC directed the union movement towards the coming electoral contest. A statement signed by Whitlam and Hawke noted "the many requests for industrial action", but declared that "Trade Unions could best support the cause of the elected Labor Government by asking each member of the Union to contribute a days pay to the Labor Partys election fund", and asked unions to hold job meetings "to express support for the Labor Party in the coming election". In this meeting, Hawke made two arguments against a national strike.

First, we were arguing that the Opposition was violating the constitutional and parliamentary processes of government, therefore, how could one logically take over the processes of government by bringing the nation to a halt? Second, and a more pragmatic consideration, was that I did not believe we could call a successful national strike. And there would have been nothing more futile and counterproductive than calling a national stoppage which failed. So, there was the consideration of principle and of pragmatism.

These arguments were disingenuous. The first implies that you would not stand in the way of a military coup because it would be "illogical". I hope this essay will make it clear that a national strike called by Hawke would have been overwhelmingly observed. There is another problem with Hawkes first argument: for most workers it would *not* have primarily been a strike over constitutional issues, but an action to defend themselves from a ruthless class warrior, hell-bent on driving down wages, cutting social service spending, and breaking "union power" with new penal provisions. It would have been a strike to protect themselves from attempts to drive up profits. This was well summed up by the NSW State Secretary of the FED&FA, Jack Cambourne. When asked by Whitlam and Hawke not to strike, he replied: "Gough, we are not going to strike to save you, we are going to strike to save *ourselves*." Strike action cut against Whitlams own objectives in government, even if he did not plan to use methods as extreme as Frasers. A successful

strike against Frasers attacks would not have inclined workers to accept Whitlams.

Here, in a nutshell, is the fundamental strategic contradiction inherent in social-democracy (and labourism): it requires a measure of class consciousness, and hence class struggle, on the part of workers to exist, and create an electoral base of support. But its aim, to administer the capitalist state and the capitalist economy, requires it to constantly undermine and sometimes directly suppress working class militancy and to combat class consciousness with appeals to the national interest. This contradiction becomes particularly acute at a time of crisis, when the opposing classes fight to protect their economic interests and their power. The problem facing trade union officials is slightly different; they are torn between the desire of their members in the workplace to defend and improve living standards and conditions, and a desire on their own part for peace and stable relations with the employers. The need to constantly broker deals leads them to implicitly accept the framework of capitalism (despite the socialist and occasionally revolutionary rhetoric of some) and for Bob Hawke, in late 1975, the problem was to revive Australian capitalism and for him that meant wage restraint, orderly wage setting and the minimising of strike action. These perspectives were incompatible with any form of general strike even one to save the Labor government.

Hawkes position was initially rejected by most left wing trade union leaders John Hurst describes them as "furious". Ted Bull, the Melbourne secretary of the Waterside Workers Federation, described the call for restraint as "bloody ridiculous". One of Hawkes closest allies in the trade union movement, Charlie Fitzgibbon, the federal secretary of the WWF, also called for a national strike. He told reporters it was difficult for the unions to "play it cool" as Hawke had urged. "There are times when you play it cool and times when normal reaction is the order of the day. The normal reaction today is one of anger." At a press conference in Adelaide on November 12, the AMWUs assistant national secretary, Laurie Carmichael, said Bob Hawke was wrong in urging workers not to take strike action.

What confronts workers now is that they are refused a government which passes even the mildest social reforms. The Australian people are confronted by a triumvirate of conspirators bent on thrusting a most reactionary program down their throats. Only the people in constant action can save even the slender democracy that exists in the parliamentary system.

Stop work action, he argued, would help Labor's chances, not hinder them. Labor had won office in 1972 on a wave of action. There hadn't been enough action against the Senate's consistent blocking of Labor's reform measures. This, plus the continued appeasement of private enterprise, had opened the way to the anti-government conspiracy. AMWU national president, Dick Scott reported "an explosion of protests from members." Those AMWU branches who bothered to send telegrams to the union office backed their officials: from Footscray "strongly supports positive action to oppose Kerrs dictatorial coup stop suggest 48 hour stoppage and moratorium" and Mt Isa "calls for a 24 nationwide stoppage as a protest against the abuse of power by the Governor-General and Fraser branches. Mike Jackson, from the Garden Island Dockyard, described the sense of determination amongst some workers: "We demanded that the ACTU call a national stoppage of all workers for at least 24 hours. After Hawke's call for restraint, workers felt that if "they" are not going to do it, **we** have to."

The greatest challenge to Hawkes position came from Melbourne. On Wednesday 12 November, after his appeal for restraint, and after the Commonwealth Labour Advisory Committee had pointedly asked unions to focus on the elections, a meeting of officials from 30 left wing unions in Melbourne unanimously called a half-day general strike and mass rally in the city centre. Announcing the decision, John Halfpenny said the stoppage had been called in response to a groundswell of resentment and, "We have no alternative but to mobilise this resentment People are demanding the right to express their feelings in industrial action." Halfpenny said he agreed with Hawkes call for the unions to back the ALP. "But if he says do nothing he will be swept aside by the angry mood of the people."

Clearly, the possibility now existed for an alternative strategy to emerge to fight the Kerr coup, providing officials from the left unions were prepared to lead it. There was a substantial precedent for this: in 1969, a million workers went on strike under the leadership of the left unions (and against the open opposition of the Victorian Trades Hall Council and the NSW Labor Council) and won the release of gaoled Victorian Tramways Union Secretary Clarrie OShea, effectively destroying the Federal governments penal powers. The ability of the left unions in Victoria to meet so quickly reflected the longstanding split inside the Victorian union movement that saw 27 unions break with Trades Hall in 1969 and coordinate activity separately. Indeed, it is significant that the Victorian Trades Hall Council was mentioned only once in the Melbourne daily newspapers in the first week after the Whitlam sacking; it was functionally irrelevant.

There was an immense and volatile anger amongst working class people at what had happened, a willingness to take extreme action, and considerable evidence that many hundreds of thousands of well-organised workers in strategic industries were prepared to defy the appeals for restraint from the ACTU president. Certainly, in some ruling class circles, there is a belief that Fraser and Kerr were lucky to get away with it. Some later commented on the sense of danger or menace they felt at the time. National Party leader, Doug Anthony, found the rally outside Parliament House on November 11 "quite frightening there was a risk that it could have got out of control. People were cursing us. I was being cursed. If something had snapped it could have changed the course of Australian history." Sir Billy Snedden believed "the peace of the country was threatened and there could have been insurrection. No doubt about that If there had been some evil genius there who could have cemented them all and created a protest movement it could have been very very nasty." "Nugget" Coombs commented that, "When the constitution becomes a weapon used by one side" then it leaves "violence the only option open to the dissatisfied. I believe that in November 1975 Australia was brought closer to such breakdown and therefore to serious civil strife than at any time in its history." Former Chief Justice of the Arbitration Commission, Sir Richard Kirby, argues that this was Bob Hawkes finest hour. "Ive no doubt that without the leadership Bob gave, the unions would have pulled on a national strike." The former Liberal MHR, Edward St John (who had publicly supported Kerrs action on the day) agreed. "Australia had trembled on the brink of something terrible on Remembrance Day, and Bob Hawke had played a great part in averting disaster It was he who cooled itwho refused in 1975 to follow the hotheads."

The Melbourne *Age* in particular worried about the implications, short and long term, of the Melbourne strike, and we are entitled to assume that it reflected some portion of ruling class sentiment. The paper ran a series of articles in *Business Age* warning investors that it was too early to assume a more profitable future; that there was a serious danger of extensive strike action, and no guarantee Fraser would win. Geoffrey Gleghorn warned that "the political situation has the potential for massive even violent reactions from militant unionists with the perhaps unwelcome support of radical fringe groups." The paper predicted that if Fraser won, the new and fragile wage indexation system would be "almost certainly doomed". Beside the usual coverage of business deals, profit figures and the near bankrupt Gollin corporation, there were profiles of the leading left wing union leaders. On November 14 itself, the paper ran three background articles on it on the day; two were alarmist in tone. Creighton Burns warned that, "A militant campaign of political strikes, violent demonstrations, confrontation on the streets" was "a real possibility" and would allow Fraser to run and win a law and order election. "What is at stake in this election is not the simple and comparatively unimportant question: who shall rule in Canberra for the next three years. The much bigger question is whether moderation can still prevail in the Labor Party and whether liberalism can survive a victory for the Liberal and National Country parties." Geoffrey Gleghorn was wheeled out to warn that "Unionists cannot allow ideologues to convert a crisis for parliamentary democracy into a mini-revolution," as if this was some kind of possibility.

Any prospect of the left unions acting independently of Hawke disintegrated very rapidly. Less than 24 hours after their Wednesday meeting and Halfpennys militant press statements, *The Age* was reporting that Bob Hawke would be speaking at the Melbourne rally. This in itself implied some kind of compromise

and softening in the stand of the Victorian unions. None of Halfpennys anti-Hawke statements were printed in the morning press reports of the rally decision. A journalist who interviewed Halfpenny on Thursday for *The Age*, reported that, "As for Mr Hawke, Mr Halfpenny said he [Hawke] had now qualified his cool it call. He had since made it clear he was opposed only to indefinite strikes," a blatantly dishonest attempt at fence-mending. "We didnt create this crisis," Halfpenny argued, "Far from trying to disrupt society the slogans are to return to stability." John Stevens, the journalist, commented, "If I had to guess, I would venture that some sort of compromise has been reached for limiting embarrassing pre-election strikes."

The truth of this was confirmed on the day. An estimated 400,000 workers went on strike, knowing they were acting in defiance of Hawkes appeals against industrial action. All public transport was closed down. Forty thousand people rallied in Melbournes City Square. Former Labor Minister Clyde Cameron described it as "the largest political meeting I have attended in my 60 years on this earth." A student march to the main rally opposite Melbournes Town Hall converged with two other marches, one from the waterfront and one of clothing trade workers. "It was like the convergence of three mighty rivers," reported *Tribune*. Two thousand teachers marched to the rally, leaving schools "virtually closed down". *Direct Action* reported, "The crowd reserved the most enthusiastic response for Halfpenny's call for action." After an hour and a half of speeches, the crowd marched up Collins Street, pausing outside the establishment Melbourne Club to chant pro-Labor slogans.

Support for the strike was strong, but not automatic. One AMWU delegate wrote, "The four-hour stoppage was observed in most shops. Workers in Philips [sic] in Clayton voted not to go out, but 100 angry workers stopped work anyway, and went into the rally." However, many workers took action despite the non-involvement or even hostility of their own unions to the strike. The same delegate reported, "Ironworkers at Westgate Bridge were actually instructed *not* to attend the four-hour stoppage. Their response to this was not only to stop and attend the rally, but also to censure the Federated Ironworkers Association Executive for their "instruction." The Vehicle Builders Union was involved in calling the stoppage, but did little to build it at the large Ford factory in Broadmeadows. One VBU member reported that he was the only worker on his line to take the afternoon off, "but I was told that the response was better on other lines". Significant numbers of federal public servants joined the rally, and the opposition of their right wing officials to union action at this time of intense crisis for public servants created such a ferment in their union that a reform group was established in December to change the unions direction. Within a year it had come close to taking office. I was present at the rally, and next day wrote my impressions in a letter to some British socialists:

Over half of [the demonstrators] would have been industrial workers. There were marches to the demonstration by a number of union groups the seamen, the wharfies, the railway workers. One march started in Port Melbourne and picked up workers from GMH, the Government Aircraft factory and the railways on the way to the city The mood of the crowd was good-humoured, but militant. A lot of people were waiting to hear Bob Hawke speak, even though he had told unionists to "cool it" The Melbourne demonstration then marched up Collins St. to the Old Treasury and heard insipid go-home and be peaceful speeches from Frank Crean, Clyde Holding and John Halfpenny [Halfpenny] said that the demonstrators should go home before peak hour to avoid disrupting transport home. After their speeches, these leaders walked away and left 30,000 standing in a crowd on the streets wondering what to do.

But the demonstrators did not want to go home. *The Battler* later reported:

At the urging of SWAG members and other militants, fifteen thousand marched up to Parliament House where SWAG called for a march on the Stock Exchange fifteen thousand

militant, angry people marched through the city chanting "Strike Fraser Out" and "We want Gough". At the Stock Exchange, there were more militant speeches and chants of "General Strike". At 5pm, the crowd marched back to the city square to disperse.

There was clearly a wide gap between Halfpennys rhetoric, the agitation of the Communist Party to which he belonged (which was calling for a national strike) and the actions of the Metal Workers Union leader. *The Battler*, a small socialist newspaper, pointed it out. "He had said repeatedly that he was for mass action, but when it came to the crunch on the steps of the Treasury, he had nothing to propose to the masses of people who clearly wanted action. All he could say was go home." The paper quoted *Tribune*: "With leadership and organisation, the illegal Fraser government can be swept aside in a movement going far beyond a conventional election campaign". On Friday 14 November, there were 40,000 militant trade unionists on the streets of Melbourne, looking for that kind of leadership. They did not find it.

To have had a national impact, the Melbourne strike would need to have had support interstate, and especially in Sydney. Yet there appears to have been no attempt by left union leaders there to have followed the Melbourne example. When I raised this with Tom McDonald, who was State Secretary of the BWIU at the time, he said that such political issues were the domain of the Federal Secretary, Pat Clancy, that he had heard nothing from Clancy, and that the split in the Communist Party in 1970, which produced the pro-Moscow Socialist Party of Australia, had generated considerable personal bitterness and seriously divided the left in Sydney where many unions had SPA-aligned officials.

In Brisbane, there was an official Labor Party rally at lunchtime that Friday. Some 15-20,000 people jammed King George Square and surrounding streets to hear Gough Whitlam. Significantly, the rally was backed by a strike estimated to involve 100,000 workers. Unlike Melbournes strike, there was no visible sense that the action had been called in defiance of either the Trades and Labour Council or the ACTU. Indeed, the right wing Storemen and Packers Union called its 7000 members out on 24 hour strike and 1000 job delegates marched to the rally after a morning meeting addressed by Bob Hawke as part of his campaign to limit union action. Nevertheless, it was a massive strike, and could have been used to campaign for nation-wide action. Other strikers included 1000 waterside workers, and builders' labourers whose union had called a national strike for the day. Seamen were called out for 24 hours, as were the 8500 members of the Meat Union, and 3000 members of FED&FA. Building tradesmen walked off the job, while railway workers -- other than those connected with the running of trains -- stopped for two hours. Thousands of metal workers attended the rally and were expected to stay out for the rest of the day, as did Electrical Trades Union members employed by the Brisbane City Council and the Southern Electric Authority and transport workers from several depots. A march from the University of Queensland started with 300, but had grown to 1000 by the time it arrived in the city. There were also mass rallies that day in Adelaide (8000), Townsville (3000) and Gladstone (1000).

The importance of strike action, and of union leaders acting quickly and boldly in such a crisis, can be seen by looking at the major trade union rally in Sydney, in Hyde Park at lunchtime on Monday 17 November. Perhaps 12,000 people attended, making it numerically smaller than the rally run by the much weaker Brisbane union movement. Several thousand building workers stopped work and marched through the city streets to the rally. Once again those attending were overwhelmingly workers. *Direct Action* commented, "The smaller crowd in Sydney resulted from the lack of any publicity initiated by the organisers in the Labor Council. The fact that unions were instructed not to strike also reduced the size of the rally." While waterside workers did stop, railway workers were instructed to work in Sydney whilst the rest of their union nationally, the AFULE, was on strike for a wages and conditions claim. The rationale was to make it possible for people to get to the rally; the effect of having the trains running was undoubtedly the opposite the impact was minimised and the attendance suffered. The moderation of the fiercely anti-communist NSW Labor Council had shown its value. The coverage in the next days *Sydney Morning Herald* was derisory.

An election campaign like no other

At this point, the movement to in some way challenge the Kerr coup was definitely over, but the campaign to re-elect the Whitlam government was just beginning. It was no normal election campaign. Every previous account has noted that the election meetings and rallies were historically large and passionate. But the shockwaves of the first week continued to flow through, producing more strikes, harassment from employers and bitter disputes in workplaces, a huge and bitter conflict over the behaviour of media proprietors. Thousands of people joined the Labor Party 3000 in the first week alone and tens of thousands more volunteered to help in individual electorates. The Labor candidate for Casey (Vic) reported that he had 500 more helpers than in 1974, many mobilised by an appeal from the Australian Union of Students. Insurance companies mobilised *their* staff to campaign against Labor and its plans for an Australian Government Insurance Corporation. Despite all the effort put into Labors campaign, it rapidly lost ground as the newspapers and TV stations reasserted control over the political agenda.

A spiteful decision by the trustees of the Sydney Opera House to cancel the booking for the Labor Partys campaign opening was turned to Labors advantage when the venue was shifted to the Domain. The result was a triumph, with forty thousand people attending. A number of trade unions, pre-eminently the Metal Workers, worked hard to persuade their members to stop work to attend the lunchtime rally. *Daily Tribune* reported a meeting at the Namco factory where the AMWUs Laurie Carmichael persuaded the 700 workers to stop work to attend the rally en masse. Amongst unionists marching to the rally were glassworkers, waterside workers, building workers, teachers, seamen, and Garden Island Dockyard workers. Laurie Oakes wrote of unionists walking off the job in suburbia and travelling in by the busload. "It was the biggest political meeting in Sydney since the :Lang days, some of the old-time Labor men said." A cynical *Sydney Morning Herald* reporter, James Cunningham, reported that, "There was also the seemingly interminable chanting that is now a feature of each Whitlam rally. Did anyone, one wondered, ever want Curtin or Chifley or even Menzies as these people now appear to want Gough."

The Domain triumph was repeated around the country. That evening, the Labor campaign was launched in Melbourne at an emotion-charged, televised rally of 8000 people in Festival Hall. The following day, Whitlam went to Perth, where meatworkers at Robbs Jetty walked off the job and wharfies, seamen and dockers marched through the streets on their way to join a crowd of 7000 jammed into the Entertainment Centre. 4000 heard Whitlam in Adelaide and 2500 in Cairns. Four days before the final vote, 9000 came to hear Whitlam at Endeavour Oval in Sutherland, Sydney, while two days, with Labor being written off by the opinion polls, later 20,000 people turned up to Moorabbin Oval in Melbourne, "crammed into the stand and went crazy when Whitlam arrived and left the field." Migrant organisations organised special rallies for Whitlam and they were very large and passionate. In Adelaide, 4500 came to the migrant rally, There were hundreds of smaller, but nonetheless, large rallies: 1000 at Mordialloc in Melbourne and 500 in a Frankston; 500 at Campbelltown on the outskirts of Sydney were just some examples. As well as the tens of thousands of workers who walked off the job to attend some of Whitlams major rallies, there was further sporadic industrial action.

The price of electoralism

One result of limiting the struggle against Fraser to a conventional electoral campaign can be seen in surveys commissioned from ANOP and published in the *National Times*. They showed the proportion of swinging voters who saw the breaking of rules and conventions and the sacking of the Prime Minister as the main issue falling from 41% on 19-20 November to 32% on 26-27 November and 27% on 3-4 December. Those who saw economic management and inflation as the major issue rose from 21% to 30% and 37% over those same weekends. The electoral impact of this could be seen on polling day. The final Labor vote was down 6.5% and the Liberal-NCP vote up 6.4%. But Labor lost almost every House of Representatives seat requiring a swing of 8.5% or less, and held almost every seat requiring a swing of

more than 8.5%. The Party had done less badly in strongly blue collar areas and poorly in more mixed electorates. This is especially ironic, given that the Whitlam/Hawke strategy was aimed at appealing to those people.

One issue I have not researched thoroughly is the nature and impact of the election campaign itself. This was a moment of profound ideological crisis in Australia. The recession that started in 1974 saw the almost overnight junking of Keynesian economic strategies by academics and government officials. Milton Friedmans 1975 visit to Australia had been a triumph. There was a sharp attack on government provision, and a New Right was emerging. Under the impact of the crisis, Labor itself had moved sharply to the right. Government Ministers had explicitly attacked wage levels, government spending on social services and unions. Promised new programs in child care and welfare were unceremoniously dumped. One miner, who met Labour Minister Jim McClelland and Social Security Minister John Wheeldon in September 1975, commented that if you "shut your eyes you wouldnt have known whether it was a Labor or a Liberal Minister speaking." Labor MP Gordon Bryant was not the only one to describe the Hayden Budget as a "Liberal Budget". Yet Labors election campaign featured its leading right wing ministers, Bill Hayden and Jim McClelland, boasting that only they were able to bring down inflation because they had a policy of wage indexation and wage restraint; that only they were able to control the unions; that they were tough, responsible economic managers now. One wonders how unionists attending a Labor rally, were supposed to explain McClellands policy to others in their workplace or neighbourhood. *Tribune* claims his prominence was resented, reporting that at the Hyde Park rally in Sydney on 24 October, "The coolest reception was reserved for Senator J R McClelland, Minister for Labor responsible for the wage freeze campaign and attacks on militant unions."

It is also questionable whether McClellands hard line won any "swinging voters". Voters hearing him were entitled to conclude that Malcolm Fraser had been largely right, that the unions and their wage claims and equal pay and strikes were at the heart of the problem, that the Liberals had been right first, that if business confidence and higher profits were, as Labor said, the key to prosperity, then it made sense to elect the party closest to business. And that given the "chaos" Labor had presided over, there were good reasons for electing a Party that had previously presided over an unprecedented period of prosperity.

It was always going to be difficult for Labor to win an election after presiding over a period of economic crisis. However there is more to the fate of working class people than Labors electoral fortunes. The fact that the wider struggle was focused on saving the Labor Party saw union vigilance drop. One reason is that ensuring "restraint" from the unions was central to Labors economic policy. One of the casualties was union opposition to wage indexation guidelines, which prohibited any pay rises outside those granted by the Commission. Before the constitutional crisis, there had been intense conflict between many unions and the new Minister for Labour, Senator Jim McClelland, about these guidelines. When Fraser came to power, the unions had accepted the wage indexation system with all its restrictions on collective bargaining. The "taming" of shop floor militancy was well and truly under way. This opened up a long period of retreat for the union movement.

The legacy of struggle

But there was also a positive legacy. The Fraser Government had been considerably traumatised by the resistance to its bid for power. Max Walsh argued that Frasers economic policy needed union cooperation, but the manner of his coming to power made that near impossible. The result was a profoundly inconsistent policy which upset his supporters without winning any points with the ACTU. "He was hobbled by the events of 11 November", Walsh concluded. Former Liberal Minister Ian Macphree believed that:

his policy daring was quelled by the anger directed at him pursuant to the dismissalhis inability to gain a rapport with the general public reduced the quality of government decision-makingthe dismissal soured us for seven years!

In a recent interview, John Howard described the early Fraser government as "tentative".

I think it turned on a feeling that he'd really pushed the thing to the limit getting there A few weeks after I was appointed a minister [of Business and Consumer Affairs] [Fraser] rang up and said: "Oh look, we have had this commitment to get rid of the PJT [the Prices Justification Tribunal]." He said: "We ought to go soft on that." I said: "Why?" He said: "We need to give Bob Hawke a win."

A struggle as profound as that to save the Whitlam government is bound to produce aftershocks, and they can be, in a sense, another measure of its importance. The general strike unionists wanted to defend Whitlam was finally called in defence of Medibank in July 1976. Both Fraser and Kerr were confronted by angry demonstrations wherever they went. Kerr was effectively driven from office in 1978 and into exile for eight years. New members flooded into the Labor Party. That December, the Secretary of the Dee Why branch in Sydney reported that, "in spite of or because of our landslide defeat last Saturday we had fifty-five members and supporters attend our monthly meeting last Tuesday night. A record." In a paper written in 1984, former student activist Simon Marginson gave his impressions of the stormy and "semi-spontaneous" 1976 student strike which successfully stopped a number of Fraser Government cuts. "The strike was fuelled by the off-campus anti-Fraser feeling and student adherence to Whitlam's reforms." Hundreds of new student activists emerged as a result. The movement, initially for a new constitution, now watered down to demanding a republic, represents the most enduring of the after-effects.

Conclusion

The movement against the blocking of supply and the Kerr Coup has been misrepresented in most histories as an enthusiastic and bitter campaign of meetings and rallies focused on the re-election of the Whitlam government.

Yet at the beginning, there was a serious attempt to stop Frasers bid for power using strike action that involved well over half a million workers a major industrial campaign in anyones terms. There was also a widespread, popular radicalism that was so militant that for perhaps the third or fourth time this century, the leaders of the labour movement were forced to discuss demands for national, general strike action. Indeed, for a time it looked as if the powerful left unions, such as the Metal Workers, might lead a struggle, but for reasons as yet unknown, they backed away from this. This was a struggle the labour movement could and should have won, and it paid a bitter price over the coming years for its defeat.

This movement brought sharply to the surface the inherent contradictions of labourism setting out to administer the capitalist system while relying on working class organisation and struggle for its existence and success. The result of such politics is that at crucial times in the class struggle, when great issues are being decided, workers find their leaders preferring to accept defeat rather than fight. Half a century earlier, a leader of the British trade union movement declared, in the middle of that countrys greatest general strike, "I have never disguised that in a challenge to the Constitution, God help us unless the government won." The words may have been those of JH Thomas, but they summed up Bob Hawke and his appeal for Australian workers to "cool it". And yet, despite Hawkes efforts, the movement undermined Fraser and made his government more hesitant than either it had intended, or its supporters had wanted.

The economic impasse of capitalism is far more advanced today than in 1975, and Frasers government looks almost benign by comparison with those of the 1980s. The need for a socialist alternative to Labor, an alternative with the ability to provide workplace leadership when our elected officials fail us, is urgent. Next time we face the kind of generalised class conflict that we saw in 1975, the stakes will be much higher.

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