

# COCKATOO, THE ISLAND DOCKYARD:

Island Labour and Protest Culture

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## Abstract

The Cockatoo Island dockyard, off the shores of Balmain in Sydney Harbour, was the largest and most important shipbuilding and repair site in Australia for many decades. It has also been the nation's most convoluted and industrially complex and disputatious site. The nature of the island and its dockyard workforce from 1850 until its closure in 1992 made for unique industrial and social outcomes, and affected how people were organised, and how they shaped the physical and cultural spaces of Cockatoo Island. Cockatoo Island constituted a geographically concentrated force of power.

This article interrogates the cultural and industrial constitution of the Cockatoo Island workforce through its industrial life in the mid-twentieth century. Employing the perspectives of labour geography with its emphasis on space and place, and an emphasis on worker agency, it discusses the importance of a spatially, locally and globally constituted island workforce to the nature of Cockatoo Island's working culture. It argues that interrogating the concept of place is vital to understanding the industrial history of the island-dockyard.

## Keywords

Cockatoo Island, unions, labour history, Sydney

## Introduction

Cockatoo Island in Australia's Sydney Harbour has had a mixed history. Indigenous people called the island Wa-rea-mah and most probably used it for a fishing base, but not as a home as the island has no permanent water supply; no physical evidence of this early use of the island remains. European Sydneysiders first used the island as a penal settlement from 1839 to 1908, when it was known as Biloela, and as a reform school for boys and girls from 1870 to 1880. It was used by the NSW State Government as a dockyard for ship repair from 1850. Its long industrial history ended in 1992 when the dockyard closed after the Government's decision to relocate the bulk of the dockyard's work interstate. On 20 November 2000, a group of Aboriginal rights activists, led by Isabelle Coe, set up a branch of the Aboriginal Tent Embassy on the island and lodged an unsuccessful land claim under the Native Title Act (Commonwealth of Australia, 2001). After an extended period of planning and restoration, Cockatoo Island, now managed by the Sydney Harbour Federation Trust, was opened to the public in 2007. It currently enjoys UNESCO World Heritage listing and is one of Sydney's most delightful publicly owned urban parks, with tourism,

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camping, historical tours and a wide variety of cultural events. These include film, musical and cultural festivals, artists' retreats and yacht races. The island is only accessible by boat or helicopter, and is serviced by regular public passenger ferries. The only permanent resident is the campground's accommodation manager.

It is the central, and most enduring, use of Cockatoo Island as a dockyard that concerns this paper. The Cockatoo Island Dockyard has been the most prolific, complex and industrially vital shipbuilding site in the country's history. As well as building and repairing navy and merchant ships for Australia and other nations, it contributed greatly to Australia's non-maritime development by producing products for power stations, bridges, dams, ports and mines. It was Australia's largest post-World War One Commonwealth employer. The many unions representing workers on the island developed particular geographies of power around their local branches, and sometimes these clashed with the state and national union organisations. Throughout most of its operation as a dockyard, Cockatoo Island was a place of very frequent and often intense disputes. As part of a larger study on Cockatoo Island, this article interrogates the unique labour situation of the island, during its use as a dockyard from 1850 to 1992, arguing that it constituted a unique space of labour.



Fig 1 – Aerial photograph of Cockatoo Island as it is today. Image by Sydney Harbour Federation Trust.

This article explores the circumstances of Cockatoo Island during its use as a dockyard, and proposes that five factors came together to produce a unique agency of workers and, consequently, a distinctive cultural and social identity for the island. The factors are: the general industrial situation of the period of early to mid-twentieth century Australia; the working conditions of the shipyard; global labour influences; the physical isolation of the workplace; and the influences of workers' home lives in Balmain and surrounds. The article draws upon the priorities of labour geography, which analyses economic sites as actively produced by workers. Employing the ways

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in which a place can create a sense of identity, labour geography, with its emphasis on worker agency, delineates that “the geographical contexts within which workers find themselves can have significant impacts on their political and economic behaviour” (Carmichael and Herod, 2012: 204).



Figure 2 – Location of Cockatoo Island in relation to the inner-city suburbs of Sydney. Map by Sydney Harbour Federation Trust.

### A Space of Unique Trade Union Organisation

The identity of Cockatoo Island and its dockyard workers is, firstly, unique because of the particular industrial situation of Australia when the dockyard was established, and in the subsequent decades. Since the development of Australian trade unions in the 1850s, the nation's workforce has been notably militant and energetic in fighting for the rights of working people: one of the distinguishing features of Australian industrial relations is its high union density (Hill, 1984: 435). The growing wave of union militancy and activism amongst blue-collar workers in Australia around the early 1900s was matched by a growth in union membership. Later, the 1950s in particular sustained a high level of employment, and even during economic recessions in 1952 and 1956, unemployment was never higher than 3%. Along with peak levels of unionisation, this placed workers in an advantageous position to achieve many of the gains they had been refused throughout the war years. Australian employees' membership in trade unions reached its highest point in 1954 of 59% (Martin, 1975: 3). After the lifting of wartime prohibitions on industrial action, the number of disputes was high, particularly on Cockatoo Island; through the 1950s, a range of issues (which included the improved economic climate) resulted in a slight decrease in this number. As in most

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nations, Australian union membership began declining from the 1970s; only 18% of the labour force was still unionised in 2011 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011).

Many aspects of the general political context made for a highly charged atmosphere within the Australian labour movement in the early to mid-twentieth century. A feature of industrial relations in this period was the introduction and strengthening of parliamentary bills and amendments affecting organised labour. Government arbitration systems adjudicated an increasing number of disputes, whereas previously, consensus and rank-and-file action was more common. These arrangements engendered much criticism. Another issue affecting the labour movement was its diversifying constitution. The proportionate increase of migrants and women in the workforce, together with the rise in white-collar employment and the effects of mechanisation and automation, transformed and reorganised union perspective and tactics through the mid-century period. Australia has been one of the most strike-prone countries, historically; during the period 1962 to 1981, Australia was fifth in a list of twenty industrial nations in terms of working days lost per employee (Hawke and Wooden, 1998: 76).

As at other times, Australian trade unions operated within a range of political persuasions and strengths; much union leadership, especially in the blue-collar industries, tended towards the dogmatic and sectarian. Many were also proactive and worked in the interests of their members. Communist activists were often most recognised and influential in a number of unions. From the late 1930s until the late 1950s Communist Party of Australia (CPA) members were especially prominent in left-wing trade union leadership, most notably in those unions represented on Cockatoo Island. Working-class communists found their way into mainly manual trade unions, and this period was particularly active in protest. Morris notes the closed-shop situation of the Australian waterfront industries, from as early as 1900, where “the possession of (union) registration and a union ticket provided necessary and sufficient employment qualification” (Morris, 1981: 61).

The organisation of production at Cockatoo Island was complex, due to the variety of production tasks undertaken, the high number of people employed, and the large number of trade unions involved. The main areas of production were shipbuilding, ship repair and conversion, submarine manufacture and repair, and other engineering production works. There were up to fifty trades represented amongst the workforce of Cockatoo Island: amongst them were boilermakers, blacksmiths, ship painters and dockers, gas fitters and plumbers, electricians, shipwrights, storemen and packers, timber workers and the biggest group of all, ironworkers. At the period of its highest employment, the workers on Cockatoo Island were represented by 22 trade unions, however most were covered by six: the Federated Ironworkers Association (FIA); the Federated Ship Painters and Dockers Union (P & D), the Boilermakers Society, the Amalgamated Engineering Union, the Australian Metal Workers Union, and the Waterside Workers Federation. The membership of these unions – and other blue-collar unions – rose at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with an improving labour market, a growth in shipping, and their own stronger organising and collective bargaining activities (Sheldon, 1998: 422). It also coincided with the increasing demand for craft-based labour-intensive production methods common to that period.

For much of the period of its operation as a dockyard, Cockatoo Island was a place of intense struggles over the regulation of labour. The Island, for instance, was a focus of union campaigns for the 44, 40 and 38 hour week. Demarcation caused many disputes

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on the island, and often stemmed from the basic fact that so many unions and industrial awards covered the workers there. The unions developed particular geographies of power around their local branches that serviced the Island. Sometimes these clashed with the state and national organisations as we can see with the Balmain branch of the FIA, when communists won union posts in the 1930s. Union membership grew through the WWII years, and alongside the election of a Labor government federally, the wartime National Security legislations that circumscribed the ability of employers to resist unionization assisted the strength of the Cockatoo Island unions. However, the growing rancour between the FIA national leadership and the members of its Balmain branch led to the “Battle of Balmain”, the 1945 six-week strike involving Nick Origlass and the anti-communist Laurie Short, who was then the leader of the Cockatoo Island FIA shop committee. This dispute was an instance of the mixed history that the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) had with the unions represented on Cockatoo Island. During the “Battle of Balmain”, FIA Balmain delegates withdrew from the ACTU’s Congress. Another instance can be seen during the final 1989 occupation strike, when the ACTU withdrew their support for strikers. Kelly, who was on the island for fourteen weeks, writes of the “ACTU sellout” (Kelly, 1990: 40).

### The Working Conditions of the Island Shipyard Space

A second factor contributing to the unique situation of Cockatoo Island results from the working conditions of the Island’s waterfront industry. Like most shipyards around the world, early workplace conditions at Cockatoo Island were very demanding, and physically gruelling. Dockyard worker Issy Wyner describes circumstances in the early days:

*Much of this work in dry docks and in slips is dusty, steamy, and swelteringly hot in summer; cold, damp and draughty in winter. Dock work is to a great extent carried out in cramped, stooped positions, in the gloomy area beneath a ship’s bottom as it sits on the dock keel blocks about 3’6” above the dock floor. It is arduous, back-breaking, dangerous ... inboard work on vessels, too, was, and still is, mostly carried out in a cold, dank atmosphere, such as when cleaning and coating ship’s tanks, where the work is done in a crouched position in the restriction sections of tanks (Wyner, 1983: 19).*

Over the years, working conditions were gradually improved with union successes in protests, but the fact was that most work on Cockatoo Island was blue-collar labouring. Getting clean during and after work was also a perennial industrial issue. For many years showers were not provided, men covered in dust and grease caught the ferry and walked the streets to their homes. Noise, also, was a constant source of irritation and, for many workers, deafness was the consequence; and in the early years “there were no mess rooms – men ate their meals on the wharf or on the deck of the ship in all weather” (Hillier, 1981: 11).

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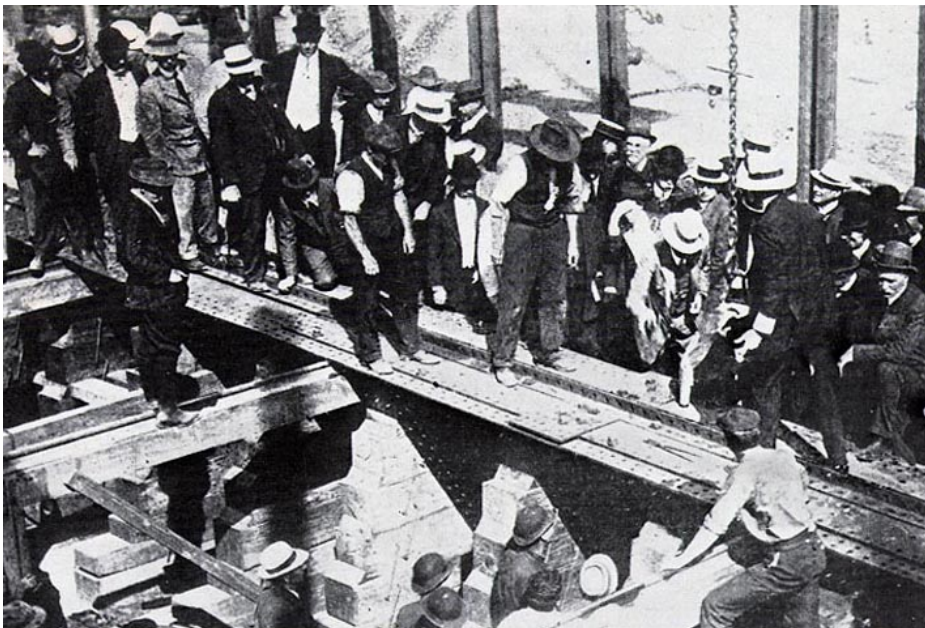


Figure 3 – Laying a keel at Cockatoo Island, 1913. Photograph courtesy of Issy Wyner, John Englart and Joe Harris.

Working conditions were not only dirty, but dangerous, and at Cockatoo Island, many disputes centred around issues of health and safety. Men worked with some of the largest engineering equipment in the country - lathes, band saws, cutting gear, live electricity, molten metal and the possibility of explosions. The union movement continually agitated for health and safety improvements. Painters and dockers, for example, suffered lead and arsenic poisoning from paints and noxious fumes. It was years before employers supplied them with oilskins and gumboots to work in the water beneath a ship's keel. In all trades, generally, protective clothing was minimal. In 1957, the Metal Trades Award stipulated the use of protective equipment for welders: leather aprons and sleeves, leggings, anti-flash goggles, gauntlet gloves, rubber footwear and welder's shield.

Asbestos dust was an unknown hazard that permeated the workshops and the ships being built or repaired in the docks and on the slipways, and cases are still being brought against the Commonwealth Government for asbestos-related diseases and deaths of former Cockatoo Island workers (NSW Dust Diseases Tribunal, nd). Between 1974 and 1989, at least 16 Cockatoo Island ladders died of asbestos-related diseases, and more have died since. The use of asbestos in Australian workplaces was banned in 2004 as a result of union campaigns (Sydney Harbour Federation Trust, nd).

It was through awards that unions secured protection for workers in dangerous occupations. From 1904 when it was established, the Australian Industrial Relations Commission created awards that set the minimum standards of employment for workers in various industries. The struggles to improve conditions were important parts of the history of the waterfront unions, and were vital to the constitution of the

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militant, radical nationalist outlook of many of the unions representing workers on Cockatoo Island.

Wages and conditions of overtime and shift work were changed during both World Wars to take account of the extra work taken on at the island. During World War II, a special Wartime Agreement included provision that no wages would be varied without Commonwealth agreement (a source of friction, where wartime prices for staple goods had risen sharply and other non-government workplaces were not so restricted). Under wartime legislation, workers in these vital industries were able to be directed to undertake work and were not free to resign without approval, and work on Cockatoo Island was classified as a reserved occupation. Whilst the unions, especially in the early part of the war, largely accepted these conditions, the non-payment of penalty rates for compulsory overtime was a matter of on-going tensions and disputes. As unions' power was diminished in this period, the role of shop committees became more pronounced, and relations between management and unionists improved somewhat;

*the role of employers in encouraging joint production committees, and of trade unions in encouraging job delegates' committees, was more important than the pre-war sense of rank-and-file rebellion. This temporary community of employer and union interests appears to have rested precariously upon a feeling of consensus peculiar to wartime conditions (Rimmer and Sutcliffe, 1981: 231).*

Benyon and Hudson (1993: 183) write that managers and even capital may develop, with labour, "a shared commitment to a location which... could underpin a sense of locality", and I want to explore this in my ongoing research.

Since the 1890s a very large number of wage rates were paid to members of the various occupational groups employed at the dockyard and disputes on wages, demarcation and awards have been conducted on behalf of the island's workers. At one stage, in 1919, 51 awards covered the waged workers on Cockatoo Island, a situation that made negotiations by management difficult to say the least (Australian Government, 1919: 7). Godden Mackay Logan write that Cockatoo Island

*was Australia's largest post-World War One Commonwealth employer, and the complexity of its union and guild membership, and the history of its demarcation and industrial disputes, catalysed the Federal Government to establish the first Federal wage and conditions award in Australia (in 1918) and apply it to Cockatoo Island (Godden Mackay Logan, 2006: 213).*

After decades of disputes, in 1968 the Port of Sydney Shipbuilding and Ship Repairing Industry Industrial Agreement provided for common wages and conditions throughout the waterfront industries. In 1976, this agreement became a Federal Award, known as the Waterfront Agreement, and was considered to be reasonably successful at stabilising what had traditionally been a highly disputatious industry. Jeremy (2005: 200) comments that the Agreement "worked reasonably well whilst the workforce was stable. It was less effective in times of growth".

There was a particularly strong apprenticeship-training scheme on the island, covering many trades, with a special apprentice training school established in 1945. Many of the

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island's older and more senior workers had begun their careers decades before, as apprentices. Here, "both the employers and the unions on the Island recognised the benefits of training skilled workers and the close involvement with the federal government, meant all three parties could work together to obtain the best training results" (Godden Mackay Logan, 2007: 92). This strong program trained many thousands of young Australians and continued until the end of operations, and engendered strong solidarity amongst the many workers on the island, and ex-apprentices and ex-employees still hold reunions (Cockatoo Island Reunion, 2011).

### Cockatoo Island and Global Labour Influences

A third reason for the particular situation of Cockatoo Island as a unique island labour identity lies within the connections to global labour makeup of the Australian maritime industries, which produce a unique agency of labour. In the first three decades of the twentieth century, the British shipbuilding and repair industry was also the world's largest. As in Australia then, the workforce was highly casualised and was expected to work at short notice; and craft unions, many of their members organized in squads, with closed shops, with their functions strictly demarcated, dominated the production process in shipbuilding and also the ship repair sector, with an overtly adversarial attitude towards industrial relations (Murphy, 2013: 6). The sharp decline in the British shipbuilding industries in the early part of the 20th century, as "employment in shipbuilding in Scotland dropped from 100,000 in 1920 to 50,000 in 1925 and to 10,000 in 1929-32", brought a boon to Australia with the emigration of many of those men, a great many of them to Australia (Harper, 1998: 10). Erickson notes that a great many of established British craft unions, including the Engineers, and the Iron Founders "continued to encourage the emigration of their members and to aid them to emigrate by making grants of money and by supplying useful information and advice" through the period 1860 to 1900 (Erickson, 1949: 250).

Jane Wills' (1996: 357, 372) work on a "spatial translation of tradition" whereby "workers seek solidarity from others, taking their own lessons of struggles to trade unionists and supports in other places" is important for understanding the nature of the Cockatoo Island workforce - when the tradesmen from Scotland and England brought their militarism and organisational tactics with them alongside their political convictions and their trades skills, and families. Their ideas and actions influenced Australian-born and other workers at Cockatoo Island, and they swelled the ranks of union office-bearers there.

Lier (2007: 829) writes that labour geography portrays labour as a proactive force and workers as active agents in the making and shaping of the geographies of capitalism, as they engage in the spatial make-up of their own social reality. The cultural dimension of the migration of skilled tradesmen from the shipyards of the UK in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and the early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries was important: Jeremy notes that "many men came to Cockatoo Island from British shipyards bringing their skills and traditions with them" (Jeremy, 2006: 247), and the influx of working-class skills and culture from the Clyde, the Tyne and Liverpool could be heard in the myriad of accents on the Island. Importantly for this article, they brought with them their strong labour and unionist traditions. As Wills reminds us, "class organization entails geographical relationships as well as historical ones, and in this sense, traditions are geographically as well as historically constituted" (1996: 354). Future research will investigate the detailed influences of labour migration on the industrial and political strength of this workforce.



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### The Physical Site of Cockatoo

The fourth element of this article is vital for a geography of labour: a number of characteristics of the physical site of the workplace produced a unique agency of labour. Of course many external factors - including a growing economy and rising demand for bigger ships to be built - have shaped the internal space of Cockatoo Island. But, unusually for a workplace, the geographical space of the dockyard was produced quite deliberately. Throughout the whole of its history, the demands of shipbuilding and expanding engineering works continually modified Cockatoo Island physically, and consequently the methods and organisation of production on the island were modified. Jeremy details the substantial changes to the Island that took place in the period around World War I (2005: 55). After the island was taken over by a private company, Cockatoo Docks and Engineering Company Limited, in 1933, a great deal of physical development of the island recommenced, with large areas of land reclaimed, and new roads built (Ireland, 1987: 2.3). During the period of World War II, further work was undertaken, and in 1967 a modernisation operation paved the way for the dockyard to work on submarines, as the last major advances for the island. Five hectares have been added to the Island's original 12.9 hectares over the years of the Island's human occupation.

The recruitment practices of the Sydney waterfront, and in particular Cockatoo Island, are important to mention here. Obviously this dockyard was in a very unusual situation, being on an island that was only accessible by ship. Ships built on the island were often used to transport workers; the first of these was the steamer 'Biloela', completed in 1916, with a passenger capacity of 650. But the majority of island workers used commercial services, which began in 1842 with the Balmain Ferry Company servicing the island. In 1867 the Parramatta Steamship Company began stopping at Cockatoo Island on its Sydney to Parramatta run (Sydney Morning Herald [SMH], 1873: 1). In the late 1880s and 1890s a number of newly established ferry operators provided strong competition; for instance, in 1895 when the Drummoyne and West Balmain Ferry Company also included a stop at Cockatoo Island on its Sydney to Balmain run (SMH, 1895: 5). Up to 1897 the Cockatoo Island trips were free for Cockatoo Island workers, being subsidised by the dock owner – the government. But in 1897 the Premier, Thomas Farnell, questioned this situation in the NSW Parliament, suggesting that, "a private ferry company could do the work more cheaply" (Wagga Wagga Express, 1897: 2). Local Balmain businessman Thomas Henley (who was later to be a Sydney Council Alderman, Member of the New South Wales Legislative Assembly, Minister for Railways and Housing, and Minister for State Industrial Enterprises) agreed, calling the subsidy an "unwarranted expenditure of public money ... give the men the current rate of wages and they'll get to work" (Henley, 1897: 10). The following year, the subsidy ceased, the workers on the Island had to pay their own fares, and Henley bought out the Balmain Ferry Company and established the Drummoyne, West Balmain and Leichhardt Steam Ferry Company. Ironically, Henley died in "sensational circumstances" from a fall from a Manly ferry in 1935 (SMH, 1935: 13).

A number of existing ferry services were integrated into Sydney Ferries Limited in 1899, which then became the largest carrier of Dockyard workers. In 1913, Sydney Ferries increased their fares by 33%, causing uproar amongst both island workers and other ferry users. It was reported that, "over 300 employees of Fitzroy Dock signed a petition to the naval authorities asking them to provide a free boat. In the event of no arrangement being arrived at the men have decided to remain on Circular Quay wharf on Monday morning till a free boat is sent to take them to work" (Bathurst Times, 1913:

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2). On the Monday morning, island workers held a mass meeting in Balmain. The workers did carry out their threat to boycott Sydney Ferries, and ended up chartering a private boat themselves to get to work: “The steamer Bulli moved along at the critical moment and the men travelled to work on her” (SMH, 1913: 8).

The ferry ride to and from work was a great opportunity for socialisation and politicisation. From the time when the Island was used as a dockyard, labour was recruited at nearby wharves on the Sydney Harbour waterfront, notably Circular Quay, Pyrmont, Mort’s Dock and Balmain. In the early years, up until the period of World War II, when there was little certainty of employment, the maritime and wharfside employers used the corrupt and exploitative ‘bull’ or ‘pick-up’ system for recruitment of casual day-labour, which generally made up the bulk of the workforce.



Figure 4 – Ferry ‘Kanangra’ with Cockatoo Island dockworkers, 1965. Image copyright City of Sydney Archives. (From Graeme Andrews ‘Working Harbour’ Collection - photographer – Fred Saxon.)

This system was one of the main areas of union-management dispute until the 1940s, from all unions represented, in many areas – the places of recruitment, times of the pick-ups, the provision of shelters for the men waiting their turn to be engaged for labour, etc. It was not until 1925 that a ruling was made in which the principal place of engagement for Cockatoo Island was to be on the island itself, rather than at a randomly changing series of harbourside sites – yards out in the weather, exposed to the elements, with no facilities. But this still had big problems for job-seekers, as Wyner explains:

*In effect, it meant that to be picked up for Cockatoo Island, members had to get across the water to the Island, where work started at 7.30 a.m. and, if there was no work, they then had to find their way back to the mainland on whatever company launch might be available and at whatever time it might be running. In other words, men were more or less stranded and unable to seek work elsewhere when Cockatoo had no jobs (Wyner, 2003: np).*

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The recruitment of workers had always been a major issue, which unions took to the industrial courts often. Justice H.B. Higgins of the High Court of Australia, in handing down a new Award in 1918, commented on this aspect of the Island's working conditions:

*It is lamentable that so many men, mostly in the prime of life, should have to stand about, idle, waiting for a job at their usual places of hiring - earning nothing some days, nothing even some weeks, and ... earning high wages in some weeks by excessive hours of toil. The frequent bouts of idleness must of necessity lead to bad habits and to loss of muscular condition. There is a tremendous waste of human potential energy involved. Yet, under existing conditions, it is essential for the carrying on of this industry that these men shall hold themselves free from other engagements, and ready for the ships when they come (8 Commonwealth Arbitration Reports, 72-3, page 4, cited in Wyner, 2003: np).*

It was not until 1946 that the island's major unions achieved a legal roster system of employment, a result of a decades-long battle between union and management. Up until that time, Wyner comments,

*employers, of course, rejected any form of Union control over employment and insisted on Foremen control with all its pernicious overtones of selection on the basis of strength or skill, of favouritism (regardless of strength or skill), of buying favours with presents or free services, of nepotism (Wyner, 2003: np).*

The roster system's implementation as a result of concerted efforts by the militant unions represented there was a major breakthrough in improving the industry: it was designed to "visibly demonstrate equity in the distribution of work" (Morris, 1981: 51).

### The Home Lives of the Island Workers

Following on from the physical situation of the workplace, the final factor I cite is the social and political culture of the peninsular suburbs where the Cockatoo Island labour force largely lived. Ellem writes about "the importance of the local; and seeing labour as a spatial agent" (2006: 371), and it is clear from my research how support for organised seafront labour in the early decades of the 20th Century was mediated by forces embedded within the localities around Cockatoo Island. In this area in particular, this study takes much inspiration for the ways in which Taksa has analysed the ways in which Eveleigh railway workshops workers affected the cultural and political life of the surrounding suburbs (2000). There has always been a strong working-class culture in inner-city Sydney: the area was characterised as "working class, Labor, and turbulent" (Cahill and Irving, 2010: 306). Up until the 1970s, the traditional waterfront community was strong, and the majority of Sydney wharfies still lived in and around the port area. WWF Sydney Branch President Jim 'Dutchy' Young grew up and lived in the area. He considers that "there's a kinship among the working class, especially in that area. There's two groups stands out for working class solidarity, just like a beacon: the miners, and seamen and dockers. This seems to arise from the tendency to live next door to their employment" (Young, 1998: 242).

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Cockatoo Island workers were working-class. Many of the houses they could afford to rent were very small workers' cottages. Because Balmain and surrounding suburbs were not far from the centre of the city, they were popular with blue-collar workers; until the 1970s and 1980s most Cockatoo Island workers lived nearby to their place of work: Balmain, Rozelle, Woolwich, Gladesville Glebe, and the inner city area of Sydney (Milsons Point, Woolloomooloo, the Rocks).

Balmain was, in the later decades of the eighteenth century, the largest residential area in the colony of Sydney; the *Sydney News* of 11 July 1889 declared the suburb the "working man's paradise" with a population of 27,000 and many public facilities (cited in Lawrence & Warne, 1995: 2). The area, with its many kilometres of deep-water frontage to Sydney Harbour, was settled by a number of shipwrights and boatyard operators, as well as the Mort Bay, Poole and Steele, and Drake dockyards and others.

From the 1880s onwards, numerous clubs were formed including rowing, swimming, bowling and cricket. Institutes such as the Balmain Literary Institute, the Balmain School of Arts, and the Balmain Working Men's Institute (founded in 1865) – alongside other protestant-based Workingmen's Institutes in Glebe, Leichhardt, Newtown, and Rozelle (Morris, 2006) – were also established. In his research on these last Institutes, Morris (2006) argues that they had a strong tradition of self-education and mutual self-improvement through an involvement with cooperative and fraternal organizations. However, life in Balmain was not ideal. By the late 1880s, due to poor planning and the greed of developers, the suburb was overcrowded and badly organised. Factories were opened next door to houses and schools, and new streets had been created in the most inappropriate places. The Depression of the 1930s saw a lot of poverty in the area: in 1933, 38.1% of Balmain workers were unemployed, when the NSW average was 18.4% (Leichhardt Council, nd).

As noted earlier, the late decades of the nineteenth century in Australia had experienced a sharp rise in trade unionism, particularly amongst unskilled and semiskilled labourers: by 1890 union membership reached 21% in NSW, and Bowden notes how the period beginning from the 1880s was one where "unionism became common among unskilled urban workers, particularly on and around the waterfront" (2011: 55). Balmain was a working-class suburb of great political activity, and was the site of the origin of three of the most active unions representing workers on Cockatoo Island. Balmain was, then, a strong centre of working-class culture, particularly for blue-collar workers and those engaged in maritime occupations. A tightly concentrated area on a peninsula jutting out into Sydney Harbour, Balmain was accessible by road, ferry, tram and bus, and had rapidly industrialised with settlement from 1836, with factories and industries springing up, particularly around the easily accessible Mort Bay area. From 1897 to 1931 a colliery operated in the suburb. Working class culture was "not only unchallenged here but perhaps more pronounced than elsewhere" in Sydney (Murray & White, 1982: 130). Webb writes of this area, where:

*multiple affiliations and identities came together to meet the demands of their industrial work. The spaces hosting and connecting the communities were critical to this process. Labour organising is highly reliant on the spatial links between labour – for example labour precincts – and working class precincts. The notion of hubs of community reinforcing identity is useful as a way of understanding communities in Sydney's inner working class suburbs, from Newtown through Ultimo and Balmain – places where workers and their families*

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*could live, congregate and easily communicate ... Inner city residents and workers maintained a strong sense of place, particularly of the places such as meeting halls and streets, which facilitated the habits of lifetime activism. (Webb, 2005: 225)*

With its working-class culture, Balmain was a hotbed of political activity, and the people involved in the Balmain branches of political parties and waterfront unions were amongst the citizens of Balmain. The Balmain branches of the CPA, the Unemployed Workers Movement (UWM), the Industrial Workers of The World (IWW) and the Australian Labor Party (ALP) were particularly active. The ALP was established in Balmain in 1981; as was the P & D, when the Balmain Labourers' Union split into the P & D and the Amaglamated Ironworkers Assistants' Union, at the instigation of Cockatoo Island workers (Cockfield, 2005: 72).

The Balmain Trotskyists (who in the Depression helped to run the Unemployed Workers Movement) included Issy Wyner, Ted Tripp, Jack Sponberg, Anatol Kagan and perhaps most notably Nick Origlass, ex-communist and leader of one of the local FIA branches, who became the Balmain Lord Mayor. Laurie Short, National Secretary of the FIA, and head of the Cockatoo Island Shop Committee, helped form the Workers' Party of Australia in a disused billiard hall in Balmain. The 1940s and 1950s in particular saw much political activity in the area, when there was a fight for control of the Balmain Branch of the FIA from the communists. This political activity continued until the late 1960s, when development and gentrification began and prices for inner-city housing rose, and the cultural face of the area began to change.

The results of this high concentration of party and union headquarters and branches, and union leaders and members, in the Balmain area are great strengths in unions (albeit varying over the course of the twentieth century). This ties in to Southall's identification of the process of unionisation as inherently geographical, "unionization as a process of coming together, of organizing over space" (1988: 466). The area was a setting for social interaction, and the formation of networks of political, cultural and social communication, and the workers' relationship to their places of home as well as work was crucial. The political milieu of non-work life on the Balmain peninsular was, I argue, a forcefully defining quality of the Cockatoo Island militarism. Activists took on other roles to build workplace solidarity on Cockatoo Island by connecting with members' lives off the island, in their inner-city suburbs.

The final strike on the island was most interesting as workers united across industrial and trade lines, and with non-workers, to defend the place of Cockatoo Island: it was a place-based campaign, targeting the local needs of both production and labour (Castree et al, 2004: 118). 1989 saw the substantial fourteen-week occupation strike by workers to protest against the decommissioning of Cockatoo Island as a dockyard. This was the form of resistance taken against closure of the yard, as well as delocalisation. John Tognolini, one of the strikers, wrote that "support from the ACTU and the NSW Labor Council was token for a couple of weeks, and then turned into outright opposition to the struggle of the Cockatoo Island Dockyard workers to save their jobs" (1993: np). The Federal government's decision to sell off the site was at the heart of this strike. Workers had been warned of this since 1987, but did not know it was imminent until some workers read a real estate advertisement in the local *Sydney Morning Herald* newspaper. The decision to sell off the dockyard stemmed as a result of the labour governments' 'Two Ocean' policy, which meant that the government decided to relocate the Australian naval dockyard to Western Australia and close

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Cockatoo Island (which was on the east coast). As the island's workers were covered by an unusually high number of unions, the collective decision to occupy the site was important.

Throughout the occupation, support (financial, political and moral) came from many other unions within and outside Australia, as well as Aboriginal and other social groups. The island – normally with no resident workers – was occupied for most of three months, and it was a very notable occupation in Australian labour history, a rare Australian workers' soviet. However, the strike didn't achieve its objective. The Commonwealth Government threatened legal action against the occupiers, and "it broke our hearts to do it", AMWU delegate Mick Christoforou said, "but we moved a motion to return to work and continue discussing the dockyard's future" (Kelly, 1990: np). In March of the next year, 100 workers were retrenched, and in June the federal government reasserted its decision to sell the island. The final day of work on the island was 4 June 1991. Claude Sandaljian, chairman of the island's combined shop committee, said he knew early on that they couldn't save the dockyard, and it didn't help that the union leaders were against them.

*Unless you get national strikes, you're not going to win; eventually they're going to get you. But the idea was, we're not the only ones, we're just the first ones – others are going to come. If they see that we're fighting, things aren't going to go smooth for them. Every time they announce a closure then they'll have a major strike against them. Unfortunately it didn't happen, but that was the idea (Price, 2014: np).*



Figure 5 – protestors of the 1989 strike. (Image courtesy of John Tognolini.)

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Although the workers weren't able to save the dockyard or their jobs, they did achieve improvements in redundancy pay, plus bonuses on completion of the final two submarines under refit. And, Sandalijan recalls, "Finally, when the dockyard eventually closed there was a pool of money in the superannuation fund and we insisted that it be shared by everyone in the dockyard, rather than just to the executives" (2004).

### Conclusions

Australian shipyard workers and wharfies, the "men on the margins" (Brett, 1992: 88), have hugely influenced the industrial and cultural landscape of their nation; as the vanguard of the labour movement in Australia they have been termed "social levers in their own right" (Turner, 1965: xvii). They have always been crucial to the life and development of island nations, and Australia has been no exception. The workers of Cockatoo Island have been key citizens in this process of 'social leverage', because their dockyard has been the most prolific, complex and industrially vital shipbuilding site in Australia's history.

This article points to the importance of the role of locality in influencing industrial consciousness, and to investigating the interconnections between workplace, politics and culture. We know that the workplace is "an important site for the formation of social identity", as Shields has written (1992: 2). The history of Cockatoo Island demonstrates that formation of a social identity is not restricted to the workplace, but also encompasses the cultural and political precincts of the workers' homes, and their global origins.

Cockatoo Island was a company town as well as a place of high union organisation. With no residents and no non-union workers, it nevertheless constituted a unique working culture, built from the five factors outlined in this article. Cockatoo Island and the Sydney waterfront constituted a geographically concentrated force of power: solidarity, while never comprehensive, was heightened by the fact that workers lived together, near their work. With so many trades and unions on the island, the industrial life of Cockatoo Island reflected a particularly wide range of union experiences. The unions operated as active and vital agents in the evolution of a distinctive militant, working-class culture, that spans Cockatoo Island across the harbour to the inner city suburbs where many of its workers lived. As Carmichael and Herod put it, "the places in which workers live are not simply inert points on a map but active shapers of ongoing political practice, to the extent even that their physicality can influence the social relations that develop in them" (2012: 206). The workers' spatial identity, from their homes around Sydney Harbour to their island workplace, was a unique one in Australia.

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