

From the 1850s on: Radical Chinese labour in Australian history

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Contents

- [Chinese resistance on the \(...\)](#)
- [Indentured labour and Queensla](#)
- [The Chinese cabinetmakers](#)
- [Chinese seamen fight for \(...\)](#)
- [Darwin's Chinese working class](#)
- [Indentured Chinese labourers](#)
- [Conclusion](#)

Flick through any mainstream book on Australian history and chances are you'll find some version of the phrase "cheap Chinese labour". Historians usually employ it to explain the alleged centrality of the organised working class in establishing racist anti-Chinese immigration laws, particularly the cluster of federal government legislation broadly known as the White Australia policy. This competition from pliant non-union labour was interpreted through the racial supremacist ideas of the time and, so the argument goes, prompted unionists to respond with vociferous calls for the total exclusion of non-white immigrants.

But a subtle shadow tracing through the history books suggests a problem with the argument. Time and again, often without any significant conclusions being drawn, we see passing reference to Chinese workers in Australia organising, striking and generally giving hell to their employers. These are fleeting glimpses of a neglected history of class struggle waged by Chinese workers whose memory continues to be dismissed as both separate from and somehow a threat to the workers' movement.

While the racism of many early trade union officials is beyond dispute, we seldom see historians pointing the finger at the employers responsible for racist pay differentials in the first place. This reflects a deeply held conviction that the organised working class was to blame for the White Australia policy, and hence that Chinese workers were seen as an economic threat to white workers.

Not only does this ignore the role of the ruling class in propagating the dominant ideas in society, it is also founded on a racist caricature of Chinese people. Unsurprisingly, this is clearest when you read early proponents of the argument. For example, in her influential 1923 account, Myra Willard puts forward this familiar picture of the impetus for White Australia:

"The calm patient energy and endurance of the Chinese, their extraordinary economy and indifference to comfort...made them dangerous competitors for Australians, because their standard of living was much lower... [They] were to a great extent indifferent about the conditions under which they worked. Their presence, therefore, was a dead weight to the Trade Unions... The whole of Australia came gradually to sympathise with the view of the industrial aspect of Asiatic immigration taken by the workers... Australians could not accept conditions which non-European labourers were as a rule content to live under."[1]

Almost a century later, most historians share Willard's basic premise that the labour movement was the source of broader anti-Chinese sentiment, and that there was something about the Chinese themselves that catalysed the situation.

Even left wing labour historians are prone to repeating such formulations, often resulting in conclusions that should never have passed muster. To take one example, Raymond Markey argues:

"[T]he race issue became a major source of organizational strength for the labor movement because the Anglo-Celts' assumption of racial superiority cut across class divisions to embrace virtually all whites in settler societies."[2]

In other words, a policy that dulls workers' sense of class identity and bonds them with the interests and attitudes of their rulers is somehow a source of organisational strength. Apart from the obvious rejoinder that had unions recruited Asian workers en masse they would have been both numerically larger and more industrially powerful, the fact also remains that by the time of Federation and the passing of the White Australia policy, the great strikes of the 1890s had gone down to crushing defeat, and the union movement across the country had been decimated, as Markey himself had previously noted.[3]

Earlier racial exclusion laws in Victoria and New South Wales were passed in the 1850s, before the unions had even cohered as a powerful force. Moreover, those laws were not simply the outcome of anti-Chinese agitation by diggers on the goldfield as is commonly claimed, but were rather part of the racist arsenal arrayed by the top of society. The first Chinese exclusion policies were consciously aimed at creating scapegoats and sowing division amongst a restless goldfields population.[4]

In short, racist immigration restrictions were a weapon wielded against the nascent workers' movement, not a source of its own organisational strength.[5] This is the case regardless of the fact that many union leaders and the ALP historically proclaimed White Australia as a victory for workers. After all, they say the same about arbitration and even Labor's Accord of the 1980s.

Since the myth of the labour movement's "original sin" is so pervasive, it's no wonder that labour historians frequently repeat the corollary myth that Chinese workers were "cheap". Even left wing historian Lynn Beaton stumbles over this in her excellent history of the Federated Furnishing Trades Society of Victoria.

Beaton rightly describes the racism of white cabinetmakers in the 1880s-1890s as "one of the most shameful episodes in Australia's history", and acknowledges the role played by economic crisis and the bosses' scapegoating of Chinese. But in identifying the key cause of anti-Chinese racism among white cabinetmakers, Beaton falls back on the perceived difference of the Chinese themselves, most significantly their alleged disregard for the struggle to improve working conditions. She sums it up in this disorienting passage:

"The Chinese were reviled; they looked different, spoke differently, wore different clothes, ate different food, even used different eating implements, they worshipped different gods and had no respect for the Sabbath Sunday and they did not seem to care about the eight hour day."[6]

If the mere fact of difference is enough to push workers into a racist frenzy and have them demanding that an allegedly reluctant government introduce apartheid and exclusion, well frankly the working class with all its diversity is doomed.

In essence Beaton repeats the very same racist caricatures of pliant Chinese scabs that were stock-in-trade in the 1880s. This is particularly bizarre given her clear and contagious enthusiasm just a few paragraphs later when describing Melbourne's Chinese cabinetmakers organising themselves

into their own union despite the lack of support from Victorian Trades Hall.

Socialist historians have consistently challenged mainstream interpretations of the White Australia policy.[7] Broadly, they have prosecuted two key arguments: First, that White Australia was rooted in the material interests of Australian capitalism and imperialism, and was in fact a conscious agenda of the ruling class, from where it became the dominant idea across all classes; and second that within the workers' movement, a minority on the radical left always challenged racism, even meeting with occasional success in winning broader layers of organised workers to an anti-racist position.

The past decade has also seen a surge in histories of what might be called the Australian Chinese community. The most important of these have drawn on Chinese language archives to tell the stories of Chinese political organisations.[8]

These historians add tantalising evidence of the ongoing organisation and activism of generations of Chinese Australians. But most are not labour historians, much less socialists. Where things get interesting is when we draw together their asides, the passing references and the characters they identify, and see them in a broader context of the history of the workers' movement with a sense of the ebb and flow of class struggle throughout the twentieth century.

What emerges is a picture of Chinese workers in Australia that is the exact opposite of the pliant, non-union stereotype. Right through the official White Australia era, and earlier, Chinese workers repeatedly displayed militancy, tenacity and solidarity. They fought for equal pay, and at times won higher wages than their white counterparts. They were active politically and industrially. They organised closed shops. They struck, they rioted, and they mutinied. They sat down and they walked off. They organised under the banners of revolution and socialism. Some even gave their lives, murdered by the state, martyred for the cause of the workers' movement. All of this happened right here in our cities and towns, in our ports and our mines, but it remains hidden – presumably because it contradicts what John Fitzgerald has labelled “the Big White Lie” that passes for Australian history. In the following pages I intend to celebrate some shamefully forgotten and neglected heroes of our class.

Chinese resistance on the goldfields

Those who came to Australia during the 1850s gold rush represented the first significant increase in residents identifying as Chinese. By 1857, there were over 40,000 Chinese on the Victorian goldfields.[9] They came from a country where mass rebellion and even revolution were on the immediate agenda. And perhaps like the Irish rebels who also came here, the migrants from Chinese cities had no love for the British Empire, or its representatives in the Australian colonies. Britain had unleashed war, destruction and opium on the Chinese in pursuit of unequal trade treaties, open-door ports and control of key coastal cities. It was these very cities, particularly Guangzhou (then known to Europeans as Canton),[10] from where almost all the Chinese Australian migrants of this generation originated.[11] It seems that the Chinese on the Australian goldfields were generally sympathetic to anti-Qing sentiment, and it's said the majority supported the Taiping Rebellion, while some even openly identified as active participants.[12]

In 1857 at the height of the Second Opium War, 32 Anglo-French warships under the command of Lord Elgin shelled Canton for 27 hours. Hundreds of civilians were killed and the ancient city was all but destroyed. Present for the attack were Lord Elgin's personal secretaries – Henry Loch, the future Governor of Victoria, and Laurence Oliphant, who watched the destruction from his ship and enthused that it made “a deep impression upon a population whose habitual insolence to foreigners

had rendered it extremely desirable that they should be made aware of the power we possessed".[13]

In Australia, the *Sydney Morning Herald* cheered on the carnage:

"Of all races known on earth the Chinese are the most cruel... With such a people, regardless of life, and careless of suffering, punishment must assume dimensions unknown to the civilized world. You cannot chastise a savage with a fan... The Chinese have been taught unmistakably that if China and Europe come into collision it is China which is to yield. The wise are to rule the foolish under punishment, if necessary, of shells."[14]

The *Adelaide Register* meanwhile gushed over the potential for post-war commerce:

"[W]henver China shall be thrown open to the world, England and the Anglo-Saxon race in all quarters of the globe will be found to have borne an important part in the great transformation, and will doubtless profit very largely from the change... [A]s the result of the present war will of course be a new treaty, it is to be hoped that strenuous efforts will be made to throw open to the commerce of the world, not only Shanghai and the ports already conceded, but Canton, and all other Chinese ports wherever situated."[15]

This was a period of infamous anti-Chinese riots across the Victorian and NSW goldfields, including the 1857 Buckland riot and the 1861 Lambing Flat riot. It is standard to attribute these riots to the alleged inherent racism of ordinary people. But with the mainstream press running aggressive and racist diatribes like those above, how can the context of the war be ignored? For a contemporary parallel, consider prominent radio shock-jock Alan Jones whipping up the 2005 racist riot in Cronulla during Australia's war for empire in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Contrary to perceptions a century and a half later, the goldfields were not in a constant state of race-rioting. In fact, the general feeling among the diggers at least in the early days was of equality and solidarity. While the inherently competitive nature of life on the goldfields did spur conflict, on numerous occasions diggers of "non-white" backgrounds, including Bengalis, Maoris and African-Americans, participated and even led mass protests that unified people across racial lines.[16]

And of course Chinese diggers participated in the key struggles of the period. In 1853, diggers on the Bendigo goldfields rose up against the Victorian government's exorbitant mining licences and to demand elected government. Thirty thousand had signed their names to the famous petition, including many in Chinese characters. Now, after the Governor had summarily dismissed the petition and threatened to unleash cannon, a vibrant protest movement was born under the leadership of radicals like the Chartist George Thomson. Known as the Red Ribbon rebellion, its supporters wore red ribbons as a public declaration of refusal to pay the mining licence fee. In doing so, they were defying the police brutality that had regularly seen men beaten and chained to trees for not producing their licence on demand.[17] Chinese diggers joined the movement's marches and meetings, and of course wore the red ribbons.[18]

In the following year, the Eureka rebellion rocked the Victorian establishment. In the lead-up, the diggers pushed toward unity across national/racial lines. George Thomson's paper *The Diggers Advocate* stridently argued that the Chinese were welcome and for hostility to be directed instead at the "race of capitalists" which was "invading" the goldfields. A spokesman for the Castlemaine diggers expressed their desire to welcome the Chinese "as brethren with open arms".[19]

But in the aftermath of the rebellion's defeat, the press and the government made a concerted attempt to divide the miners along racial lines, pointing to the presence among the rebels of

“subversive foreigners” including Italians, Jamaicans and the prominent African American former slave John Joseph. The Royal Commission investigating the rebellion even declared that the Chinese were “a pagan and inferior race”, and recommended a measure that the diggers themselves had never raised – the imposition of a racist tax to limit Chinese immigration.[20]

Hence two taxes were introduced in 1857: a levy on all Chinese who entered into Victoria (the “entry tax”), and another on all who wished to work on the goldfields (the “licence tax”). These measures aimed to drive the Chinese out of Victoria entirely, and far from being a popular measure they were driven by those who sat in parliament. Even the less radical diggers’ paper, the Ballarat Star, spoke out against the move:

“To exclude or trample on such a people, merely because they are of a shade darker than ourselves, or because they are of a different creed, and have a different language or in childish anticipation of disturbances which at present are but visionary, seems to us not only highly impolite, but exceedingly intolerant.”

The paper even noted the outbreak of the British war against China:

“Since writing the above, we are in possession of intelligence respecting the commencement of hostilities in China, between the British and the Chinese... [But] whatever may have been the cause of it, and whatever may be its results, we see no reason to alter the opinions we have expressed above.”[21]

The new taxes were fairly easy to circumvent, so in 1859 the state government cracked down. Their action sparked off mass protests and resistance by Chinese across the Victorian goldfields, with thousands being fined and jailed for their part in a highly organised boycott campaign.

The resistance began in Bendigo with a mass meeting of 700 Chinese diggers. When the police arrested several of them, the assembled protesters managed to immediately free the men from police custody – allegedly knocking down some cops in the jostling. Seizing this convenient pretext, police on horseback charged the protesters at full speed.[22] But their resistance only grew, and within two weeks 4,000 Bendigo Chinese at a mass meeting denounced the licence tax and refused to pay.[23] The movement spread rapidly to Castlemaine, where a meeting of 3,000 Chinese also vowed not to pay. In these two towns, large numbers of Chinese were arrested and jailed.[24]

In Beechworth, another mass protest of Chinese heard a call to action from a new association – the United Confederacy of Chinese at the Ovens, Bendigo, Castlemaine, and Ballarat. The association called on all Chinese to refuse to pay the racist taxes but also to suspend all digging, puddling and economic activity. If the police arrested someone for non-payment, every Chinese person in the area was to rally immediately. They were to follow the arresting officers back to the station, where they would hold an “indignation meeting”. Significantly, the association also declared that anyone refusing to comply with these orders was to be fined £3, payable to the association, with a reward offered to informers. The state premier, perhaps with an ulterior motive, even claimed to have evidence that the Chinese had placed a £200 bounty on the head of a particular government official.[25]

The resistance was massively popular. By 1860, over 4,000 Chinese had been fined for non-payment and 2,000 had been jailed. Of the 40,000 Chinese residents in Victoria in 1859, most of whom lived on the goldfields, only 12,000 paid the licence tax. In 1860 and 1861 respectively, only 8,000 and 4,000 paid. Finally, having been made a dead letter through mass defiance, the licence tax was abolished in 1862. The entry tax was relaxed in 1863, before it too was abolished in 1865.[26]

Many historians attribute this apparent liberalisation to the ebbing of the gold rush or the shifting aims of the ruling class. While this may indeed be part of the picture, it is shameful that so many have overlooked the campaign of mass civil disobedience that made the tax unworkable from the beginning. Is there any other movement in Australian history that saw 2,000 activists jailed?

This struggle also highlights the class division in the so-called “Chinese community”. When English-language newspapers called on the Melbourne Chinese establishment to renounce the actions of the protesters on the goldfields, they heeded the call with gusto. For example, prominent Melbourne merchant Lowe Kong Meng, still feted as an early leader of the Australian Chinese community, expressed outrage at the *Argus*’s attempts to link them to the goldfield refuseniks, and even took a swipe at the Eureka rebels:

“Why should you, or the Chief Secretary, try to mix us up with proceedings of a tumultuous nature, of which it appears that some of the Chinese on the diggings have been guilty? Has anyone proved our connection with those proceedings? Would it have been just, when the riots at Ballarat occurred a few years ago, and some European miners lost their lives in consequence, to connect the European merchants and traders of Melbourne with those riotous proceedings? Why should we be dealt with less fairly than others?”[27]

Indentured labour and Queensland’s first strike

Just east of Ipswich in Collingwood Park stands a monument to the first strike in Queensland, proudly erected by the Queensland Colliery Employees Union in 1981. A plaque explains that on 8 June 1861, eight coal miners from the Redbank Mine struck for an extra shilling a ton, and thereby forged a new chapter in the history of the Australian working class. The eight miners’ names are listed: Thomas Jones, George Smith, Edward Davis, Hugh Carter, John Coleman, William Griffith, Abel Alford, and Thomas Stafford.

This is a valuable monument to an important early strike, and the strikers deserve to be remembered. But for a decade prior to that strike, and before the colony’s 1859 separation from New South Wales, Chinese shepherds across the region had been striking relentlessly. In September 1851, when 300 of them struck in pursuit of higher wages, leaving 450,000 sheep unattended,[28] they were undertaking the first strike of any workers in the Darling Downs, and in all probability the first strikes for the whole area that was soon to become the colony of Queensland.[29]

Some have described the Chinese shepherds in Queensland as being in “open rebellion” by 1851, a year in which over 40 Chinese from the area were charged with breaches of the Masters and Servants Act.[30] Kay Saunders notes that in addition to waging mass strikes, the Chinese shepherds “engaged in other sophisticated forms of resistance, such as abandoning the flocks, absconding, setting dogs on to the sheep to spoil the fleece and attempting to murder the overseer”. [31] The employers, shocked by the shattering of their racist preconceptions, were unanimous in condemning the men’s “independent” and “determined” character, and they acted quickly to “suppress all signs of coolie rebellion”. [32]

At Canning Downs station in 1852, a group of Chinese shepherds struck in protest at their low pay and the awful conditions in which they were required to work. Arming themselves with shear-blade daggers, the strikers occupied the station’s wool store. They were only forced to surrender when a posse of local white vigilantes, armed with guns and stockwhips, stormed the wool store and crushed the revolt.[33]

The resistance of these Chinese indentured shepherds in Queensland has ongoing relevance.

Indentured workers were tied to one employer; their very presence in this country hinged on their maintaining that job at all costs. Organising to fight in such severe conditions requires significant courage and carries substantial risks. But those workers proved it could be done.

The indentured labour system emerged after 1840 when Britain ceased transportation of convicts to Australia. Fearing a labour shortage, the colonies sought to circumvent it through importing indentured Asian labourers. These workers mostly came from China's Fujian province and were often kidnapped by white shippers – a practice known as “piglet selling”.

Even this kidnapping of indentured Chinese labour has its secret history of resistance. For example, in January 1853, the British ship *Spartan* left Amoy (now Xiamen) bound for Sydney, with 254 Chinese on board. But the men had been deceived. Originally believing they were to be free labourers in Australia, they learnt once aboard that they were to be indentured. In an effort to humiliate and subjugate them, the ship's captain chopped off some of the men's queues with a handsaw. Finally, ten days into their journey, the men staged a courageous mutiny. Upon the agreed signal, they rose as one. Seizing knives and bayonets, they killed the second mate and injured several others of the crew. For some time, the rebels controlled the ship. Tragically, the captain eventually managed to access the ship's store of muskets and turned them against the Chinese. Between 12 and 15 were killed, their bodies thrown overboard.[34] Upon reaching Singapore, the surviving rebels were delivered into the hands of the colonial state where 11 of them were sentenced to death.[35]

The Chinese cabinetmakers

Through the 1880s and 1890s Melbourne's Chinese cabinetmakers were particularly well unionised. They repeatedly took aggressive and protracted strike action, waging four major strikes between 1885 and 1903.

And far from being an economic threat to the white cabinetmakers, evidence suggests they received higher rates than their white counterparts. When the Chinese cabinetmakers struck against wage cuts in 1893, part of their anger was in fact directed precisely at white cabinetmakers whose low wages were, they saw, putting downward pressure on the pay rates of the Chinese.[36] The President of Victoria's Trades Hall, John Hancock, attacked the strikers, accusing them of lying about their own wages![37] Hancock was also famous for assuring a meeting of the Chamber of Commerce that the Victorian workers' movement was no threat, with his call for: “not socialism but capital and stability”.[38]

In 1895 the Victorian Factories Act Inquiry Board (a body established with an implicitly anti-Chinese agenda) had to concede that Chinese cabinetmakers were paid more than Europeans,[39] and “in the years 1897-1912, the report of the Chief Inspector showed that Chinese employees received an average minimum wage higher than that received by their Australian [sic] counterparts”.[40]

Even earlier, by 1888, Melbourne's Chinese cabinetmakers had won a 50-hour week, a minimum pay rate, a series of holidays, and they had won and were enforcing the closed shop.[41] But the real explosion was yet to come.

In September 1903, several hundred Chinese cabinetmakers launched a militant strike that shut down the whole industry for almost three months and brought class war to Russell Street. This was a meticulously planned military-style operation, with seven factories walking out simultaneously, and others following the next day.[42] Their union had pooled in advance enough resources to afford decent strike pay, and had even rented a headquarters in Latrobe Street that they kept guarded

throughout the strike.[43]

The strikers' demands were a curious mix of the moderate and the bold, including higher pay, more union rights, and two roast pigs each weighing at least 50lb to be used in religious worship.[44]

At the height of the strike, the bosses locked out up to 1,100 workers[45] and brought dozens of armed scabs from Sydney.[46] For several days, they terrorised the working class residents of Chinatown until finally the strikers organised mass physical resistance, culminating in a riot in Little Bourke Street.[47] A cop and an employer were bashed, and a number of scabs were hospitalised – or as one reporter put it: “the non-unionists...were severely handled”.[48]

Four armed scabs were arrested. But when they appeared in court the next day, a second riot erupted outside the court, with hundreds of strikers beating the daylight out of them along several Russell Street blocks. Three men were taken to hospital, and several more were arrested. By this stage, the situation had led newspapers to proclaim that Chinatown was “in a state of revolution”.[49] One claimed under the headline “Employers in dread of violence” that:

“The Chinese furniture-makers on strike are adopting such a threatening attitude towards their recent employers that the latter are in constant fear of violence, and are afraid to stir abroad without police protection.”[50]

When these new arrestees faced court the following day, a third riot broke out, with over 200 strikers massing outside the court, this time to vent their anger at the bosses who had come to appear as witnesses. One remarkably arrogant employer tried to parade right through the crowd and was promptly chased all the way to Exhibition Street and then down to Little Bourke. By the time the police caught up, they described a scene in which the strikers were “bouncing him on the road like a football”.[51]

By this stage, bosses across Chinatown were taking fright and many turned against the furniture bosses, demanding they settle the dispute.[52] The strikers upped the ante, demanding that all charges be dropped and all court expenses be covered before any return to work would be considered.[53] Several employers broke ranks and conceded defeat, complaining that the strikers had threatened to burn down their factories.[54] The writing was on the wall, and within three more days the strike was over. Most of the strikers' demands were met, including the dropping of all charges resulting from the three riots.[55]

Running such a strike required some impressive activist networks among the cabinetmakers. One English language journalist managed to sneak into the strike headquarters, and went undetected just long enough to witness an agitator delivering a belter of a speech to a packed meeting. The journalist couldn't understand a word of it, and his reporting of it all is downright racist, but the scene he describes should be familiar to any unionist.[56] The strikers also seem to have had a great slogan, which was repeated in English to at least one journalist: “Do nothing...and do it well.”[57]

Melbourne's Chinese language newspaper *The Chinese Times* railed against the strikers for allegedly bringing the whole Chinese community into disrepute at a time when they were already subject to racist vilification.[58] In fact, what the cabinetmakers were doing was proving there was no such thing as the “Chinese community”. The same class divisions between exploiter and exploited were to be found in Chinatown as anywhere else.

Despite all this, Melbourne's mainstream union movement took an appalling stance. The officials of the Federated Furnishing Trades Union were particularly revolting, being centrally involved in the Anti-Chinese League.

The Anti-Chinese League was established in April 1880, and grew out of a body called the Victorian Furniture Manufacturers' and Employees Trade Protection Association. That name speaks volumes. Most obviously, it highlights that this was a cross-class organisation. Representatives of both employees and employers were present at the founding meeting, where they decided to unite in agitating against the Chinese. However, this was not, in contrast to what is commonly believed, primarily on the basis that Chinese wages were allegedly undercutting white wages, but because Chinese furniture workshops were taking market share from white furniture workshops. Indeed, the specific catalyst for the formation of the league was to pressure the government into excluding Chinese firms (not Chinese employees as such) from the competitive tender process then underway for the contract to make 500 chairs for the exhibition buildings in Carlton.[59]

The activities of the highly respected furniture manufacturer Henry Fallshaw are also worth noting. In 1904, while a member of the industry wage board, Fallshaw repeatedly called on the government to transform the Old Melbourne Gaol into a forced labor camp for Chinese cabinetmakers and hence prevent them from competing with his business.[60]

While white cabinetmakers were forming cross-class alliances with their employers and lobbying for protectionist policies, the Chinese cabinetmakers were setting out time and time again to drive their bosses to the wall, to break them and squeeze all they could out of them. It was only later, in 1909, that Melbourne's Chinese cabinetmakers and their employers finally formed a cross-class alliance,[61] the workers driven into the hands of their own exploiters partly by the racism of the white union.

In their heyday, the Chinese cabinetmakers certainly saw themselves as part of the broader workers' movement - particularly when the class was moving. For example, during the 1890 maritime strike the Chinese cabinetmakers organised a donation for the strikers. Their representative delivered it to Trades Hall, who seem to have accepted it with gratitude.[62] But the money was soon returned after the white cabinetmakers' union complained to Trades Hall, demanding the money be returned and pledging to donate the same amount themselves in its place.[63]

The Chinese workers in Melbourne weren't alone in offering solidarity with the maritime strike. In Goondi, Queensland, Chinese wharfies refused to load a scab ship, The Palmer. It wasn't the Chinese who scabbed...it was the Church! Bishop Stanton, a passenger on the ship, removed his cloak and helped the office clerks break the strike.[64]

Undoubtedly, the unions in this period espoused racist views, and most infamously, the "white" unions in Trades Hall rejected those calls for support and solidarity from the Chinese cabinetmakers.[65] However, the attitude of some white unionists was contradictory, and there are incidents of solidarity by individuals and groups within the unions. For example, several newspaper articles refer to a white cabinetmaker and unionist who seems to have helped the Chinese cabinetmakers translate their strike demands into English,[66] and in 1902, the Sydney Labor Council declared its intention to begin organising Chinese cabinetmakers in that city and to translate all relevant material into Chinese.[67] When the Chinese cabinetmakers in Sydney struck in 1908, Trades Hall defied the pattern by offering them support and resources.[68]

In the several articles written about the Chinese cabinetmakers in Melbourne,[69] one more important point has been neglected. The Secretary of the Chinese Furniture Employees Union throughout this time was an elected rank and file worker, Harry Louey Pang. He had arrived in Melbourne from Guangdong in 1882 and was a committed Chinese nationalist republican. He would go on to be a member of the revolutionary Young China League and then a founding member of the Melbourne branch of the Australasian Kuomintang. Although he later became a petty bourgeois fruit-retailer, Louey Pang would, with other leftists, play a key role in orienting the Australasian

Kuomintang toward building a base among Chinese workers, particularly Chinese seamen who would soon turn Australia's ports and docks into a decades-long hotbed of Chinese working class radicalism.[70]

Chinese seamen fight for revolution

The militant industrial and political actions of Chinese seamen run like a red thread through the history of the Australian working class, covering many decades.

We can justifiably start this history in a strange place – the infamous 1878-1879 seamen's strike, when the white workers of the Australian Steam Navigation Company (ASN) struck against the use of Chinese labour. This racist strike has gone down in history as a seminal moment in the labour movement's anti-Chinese campaign. But as later socialist historians have pointed out, this was a strange strike indeed, given it was supported by all the institutions of the Australian establishment and the majority of the capitalist class.[71] The story usually ends there, and in doing so leaves out important developments that followed. For just a few weeks after that strike, the entire 29-person Chinese crew of the ASN ship Wotonga went on strike themselves while docked in Sydney.

The men explained that the Wotonga's captain had refused to pay their wages. When they complained, the captain had ordered the ship's cook to stop feeding them, prompting the men to walk off immediately.[72] The dispute quickly found its way to the Water Police Court, with the strikers facing charges of wilful disobedience of orders. In court the company's lawyer made a series of admissions. He acknowledged that the company had not paid the men for three months, and noted that the contracts allowed this non-payment period to be extended for three years or more. He explained why:

"Your worship, these men at sea are a nuisance; they won't work, and we don't want them. Since the strike they think they are bound by no time, and will work only when they like".[73]

In response to biased newspaper reports, three of the strikers wrote a letter to the *Sydney Morning Herald*. They explained the true nature of the dispute, but also finished with a telling remark:

"All we require is fair play, and to be treated on the same footing as European [i.e. white] sailors ... and to this we think we are entitled."[74]

They wanted equality, and they knew how to get it. This was clear enough to the bosses of ASN, with the manager complaining that before even reaching Sydney the Chinese crew had taken to forcefully implementing the standard working conditions of white crews, including penalty rates after 6pm and a 1pm knock-off on Saturdays. All of this was in open defiance of the company's racist two-tier system, prompting the manager to complain the men "had combined to be insubordinate, and grossly disobedient".[75]

The strikers eventually won their three months' back pay – a huge achievement amid such anti-Chinese hysteria. Unfortunately, the court also allowed the company to immediately end their contracts, and all 29 lost their jobs.[76] This was their punishment for standing up to the racism of the supposedly pro-Chinese ASN bosses. Despite its significance, this strike by a Chinese ASN crew seems to have never been mentioned in historical accounts of the ASN anti-Chinese strike.

In 1920 a number of Chinese republican organisations across Australia consolidated to found the Australasian branch of the Kuomintang, holding its first national conference in 1920 at Sydney Trades Hall.[77] Within two years, it had grown to claim some 5,000 members and 23 sub-

branches.[78]

This was a time of sharpening class struggle in China itself. In 1922 10,000 seamen walked off their ships at Hong Kong and Canton, kick-starting the biggest strike China had ever experienced – a 56-day general strike involving up to 120,000 workers who brought the capitalists and the British colonial authorities to their knees. The situation was soon to take on revolutionary proportions.

In these years, some important factors converged: first, the presence of radicalised Chinese seamen travelling between Hong Kong and Australia; secondly, the roughly contemporaneous emergence of the Communist Party of Australia (CPA); and thirdly, the alliance between the Kuomintang and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) which was formalised with the reorganisation of the international Kuomintang branches from loose networks into centralised parties.

The Australian government reacted to events in China by applying the White Australia policy even more strictly – refusing to grant visas to Chinese journalists and activists. A conservative element consequently began to cohere inside the Australasian Kuomintang.[79] But with the backing of the CCP-controlled Kuomintang international apparatus in Guangzhou, a left faction based in Sydney drove out the right and took over the organisation. Headed by high profile militant and founding member of the Kuomintang, Samuel Wong, they threw themselves into a monumental drive to organise seamen. Soon they had established 15 ship-based sub-branches, covering between them up to a thousand members. Total membership soon hit a record high of over 6,000.[80]

The Australasian Kuomintang was now well placed to act when in 1925 the workers' revolution in China finally burst to life with the May Thirtieth Movement. In alliance with the Red International of Labour Unions, the Kuomintang organised a solidarity strike of Chinese seamen in Sydney and collected 50,000 Chinese dollars to support striking seamen in Hong Kong.[81] And when it became clear that the Australian navy was being used as part of the force to crack down on the revolution, and may even have been involved in the massacre of strikers in Shanghai and Canton, it was the work of the Australasian Kuomintang that pulled the ACTU into action – winning them (and the ALP federal Opposition for that matter) to a position of demanding immediate withdrawal of Australian forces from China.[82]

On 2 September that year, when the crews of British ships across the empire were striking against wage cuts, Chinese seamen in Australia donated £10 to the Seamen's Union of Australia (SUA), explaining:

We Chinese seamen who have been working under the most deplorable, bloodsweating conditions only lately slightly improved by a militant struggle on our part, can fully appreciate the object of your fight against capitalism.[83]

By the end of the month, Chinese seamen aboard the *Demodocus* at Fremantle had broken customs restrictions, left their ship and joined a strike of 300 white seamen[84] after the SUA hired a translator and called on the Chinese to join them.[85] Next day the striking Chinese seamen marched at the head of the SUA rally through town. Newspapers correctly saw this sort of solidarity as a threat to the White Australia policy, reporting it under the headline "Communist Menace".[86] Upon hearing of the wage rates of the Chinese crew, the SUA publicly pledged to help them fight for equal pay.[87]

As Sophie Loy-Wilson has explained, the 1920s saw deep and significant connections being forged between unionists in Australia and China, and helped undermine further the influence of White Australia racism.[88] In August 1926, building on the solidarity that the previous twelve months had seen, Samuel Wong addressed a mass meeting of Kuomintang seamen and called on them to fight all

manifestations of racism by the ship owners and captains – demanding for example that they stop referring to Chinese men as “boys”.^[89]

In this period, the Australasian Kuomintang also campaigned against the “blackbirding” ships that passed through Australian ports. In one incident in 1927 at Townsville, they protested against a French ship carrying 480 men and women kidnapped from Guangzhou, bound for indenture in the New Hebrides. The ship was protected by cops, immigration officials and guards on board with two fixed machine guns.^[90] The kidnapped Chinese had smuggled a letter into the hands of the local Kuomintang activists, reading:

To citizens and our friends in Australia...with many tears we tell you all that we are unfortunate and have been kidnapped by robbers... We were forced aboard, unwillingly of course, but we were in the French concession and we did not have an interpreter to tell us where we were going... We have now been over a month on board, and have not called at any port but this. We are starving, have no beds or baths or sufficient water to wash. There is neither medicine nor a doctor aboard. There has been sickness aboard, and some were forced overboard... We thank you for any efforts you may make to assist us. Send an immediate reply and watch for the armed marines.^[91]

Joining the Kuomintang protest on the jetty were activists from the Communist Party’s “Hands Off China” committee. Before the cops broke up the protest, the following motion passed unanimously:

That this mass meeting of workers, and citizens of Townsville, protest against the kidnapping of the 480 Chinese workers on board the Hai Min... We declare our solidarity with the workers of the world, and pledge ourselves to prevent similar occurrences in the future, and we call upon the Waterside Workers and other workers to join hands with us in this protest.^[92]

Eventually, the brutal crushing of the Chinese revolution at the hands of the Kuomintang itself destroyed the radical working class element of the Australasian branch. Between 1927 and 1930, worker militants were purged from the ranks. Samuel Wong himself was one of the first to go, expelled in 1927, and overall membership halved.^[93]

But the work done in that short period of organising flagged what was to come, with Chinese seamen continuing to be a radical element in the Australian labour movement for the next two decades.

Throughout the 1930s a section of radical Chinese nationalists in Sydney again moved into the orbit of the communists. One of them was Wong Gar Kin, known by his anglicised name Fred Wong. He was the Australian-born son of poor Chinese migrants, raised as a worker but eventually setting up a small greengrocer’s stall in Sydney’s markets. In 1937 he joined Trades Hall’s communist-controlled “Hands off China” committee, and also founded the Chinese Youth League (CYL), which became the centre of gravity for young Chinese Australian leftists for the next two decades. Wong attracted the close attention of the Commonwealth Intelligence Service (CIS), who described him in 1947 as “one of the most active Chinese communists in Sydney”.^[94] Much of Wong’s efforts from 1937 until his suspicious death in 1948^[95] were focused on organising Chinese workers on the NSW waterfront.

Their first big battle came in 1937 when the British vessel the SS Silksworth docked at Newcastle and its Chinese crew of 36 men refused to return to Japanese-occupied China. Thirty of the crew were arrested and jailed, but six managed to get in contact with Fred Wong, who arranged to smuggle them to Sydney and billet them in the homes of steelworkers, coalminers and communists, appearing occasionally to give lightning press conferences before being whisked away again.^[96]

The Chinese Consul General tried to coax the crew back to work, having done a grubby deal with the

Australian authorities, but all 36 of the Chinese refuseniks held firm. The Silksworth departed a week later, crewed by white scabs.[97]

Perhaps the most significant outcome of all this was NSW Trades and Labor Council calling on all unions to black ban Japanese goods in solidarity with the Chinese resistance to occupation. The Waterside Workers Federation were at the forefront, and led the most famous action at Port Kembla in 1938 when they refused to load pig-iron bound for Japan. Throughout the dispute, Fred Wong and the CYL organised funds and food for the strikers.[98]

World War II soon left hundreds of Chinese seamen stranded in various Australian ports, refusing to be forced back into a war zone. The CYL organised the stranded seamen and in 1942, their efforts culminated in the formation of the Chinese Seamen's Union (CSU), which semi-affiliated to the SUA.[99] At the founding congress, 300 seamen elected Fred Wong as CSU president, and former indentured labourer Gar Lock (Arthur) Chang emerged as one of its most militant organisers.[100] The government tried three times to deport Chang, who became a member of the CPA but refused to carry a card "for security reasons".[101] His Maoist leanings were reflected in his advice to Chinese seamen:

I used to tell the wharfies "You have to have armed struggle, else how can you make a revolution?"[102]

Through a series of sit-down strikes and associated mass arrests, the CSU achieved a string of wins during the war: they drove out some of the most vicious and bullying officers; they fought for and won back-payments that the Australian state had simply stolen from them upon their arrival here; and most significantly, they fought the racist pay differentials that saw Chinese crew on British or Australian ships paid less than whites.

The waterfront at Fremantle was ground zero in this fight for equal pay, and was the scene of events that the labour movement has shamefully ignored. In January 1942, 500 Chinese seamen from six ships struck together, and sat down on deck. They were demanding equal pay with white Australians, improved conditions on board and confirmation they would not be forced back to occupied China.[103]

Their strike met the most extreme repression. Troops armed with rifles, bayonets and tommy-guns descended on North Wharf in vans surrounded by razor wire. Their orders were to remove the strikers from the ships and transport them to concentration camps so that the ships could be crewed by scabs. But the troops attacked, leaving two strikers dead. They were Tong Youn Tong, a 44-year-old quartermaster who was stabbed to death with a bayonet, and Ping Sang Hsu, a 32-year-old fireman who was shot in the back. Unfortunately, little record exists of these two working class martyrs - no doubt owing to the fact that they were Chinese, and this was "White Australia". Media reports even slandered the slain strikers as a "cunning, ruthless type never before seen in Australia".[104] At the coronial inquest, the coroner declared:

"It was very regrettable that these men were killed, but the authorities must have had some excellent reasons for taking the drastic steps, reasons about which it would be better not to know."[105]

Despite this treacherous murder of two of their comrades, the struggle of the Chinese seamen in Fremantle played a central part in weakening the racist unequal pay system, and in 1944 a new agreement was signed lifting Chinese wages to 80 percent of white wages.[106]

The Chinese seamen's sit-down strikes continued after the end of the war, and reached fever pitch in

October-November 1946, when shipping companies tried to force the Chinese back onto the old racist wage scales. In Sydney, the dispute saw three ships struck simultaneously, the Hickory Glen, the Sarpedon, and the Neo Hebridais. Their combined crew of over 100 held united mass meetings, and staged a series of protests and a high profile occupation of prominent shipping agent G.S. Yuille and Co. which ended with the police dragging them out one by one.[107] Police complained that one of the strikers graffitied a wall right in front of them, writing sarcastically: "wot [sic], gaol again?"[108]

Through their determined resistance, several hundred Chinese seamen won the right to stay in this country. They established lives here, forming relationships and finding work. But by 1949, the ALP government was blending its anti-Asian racism with Cold War anti-communism, and these Chinese seamen became their prime target. Immigration minister Arthur Calwell introduced the Wartime Refugee Removal Act, which enabled the wholesale deporting of Chinese residents. He defended it with his infamous declaration: "Two Wongs don't make a white".

The CYL and the CSU organised a campaign of civil disobedience to stop the deportations, drawing solidarity from the broader union movement. They also threw their support behind Arthur Gar Lock Chang's new organisation, the Chinese Workers Association, which set out to smash the revived indentured labour "piglet system".[109] This system had granted Chinese restaurant bosses the ability to bring in Chinese workers under harsh contracts and working up to 100-hour weeks. Through a series of protests and strikes in restaurants across Melbourne and Sydney, and with solidarity from the Waterside Workers Federation, the Seamen's Union of Australia and the Restaurant Workers Union,[110] the Chinese radicals achieved victory in 1956, with the Menzies government finally ending both the Wartime Refugee Removals Act and the "piglet system".[111]

In the meantime, the Chinese revolution of 1949 had thrown an unexpected obstacle in the path of Chinese Australian labour radicals. Initially, the revolution sparked jubilant scenes in Sydney's Chinatown, with hundreds of Chinese leftists gathering in Haymarket on the first day after the People's Republic was declared. They hoisted the Chinese Communist flag, and gave speeches in support of the revolution. Samuel Wong, the old Kuomintang leftist expelled in 1927, read out a message from Mao.[112]

But the radicals were caught off-guard when, as early as 1952, the new rulers of China began trying to rein in the militants in Australia for fear of upsetting Western governments. Arthur Gar Lock Chang explained the situation he faced while organising the Chinese Workers Association to smash the "piglet system": "the advice [from Beijing] from the beginning to the end was that we should not engage ourselves in this type of revolutionary activity".[113] Arthur Chang captures the impact:

"[N]ews came through Hong Kong that the Chinese would prefer we were not taking such a prominent part in the political activities of Australia - such as marching in May Days or waving the red flags and so on and so forth - because we are in a very precarious situation; we would be picked out by the Australian security people and be victimised. ...

Many young people left Australia unhappy about it and wanted to join the participation of building a new China, and together with people who were harassed by the immigration department we would go down to the wharf and send them off and sing "East is Red", revolutionary songs, sending them off on the wharf.

And of course these people, like myself, were picked out and blacklisted and not given an extension of temporary permits even to stay in Australia. In one sense we had become illegal migrants.["114]

The strikes, protests and walk-offs had helped transform Sydney's Chinatown into such a

concentrated hub of Chinese working class militants and communists that the influence of the bourgeois Kuomintang was severely undermined – but this reversed quickly in the climate of racism and anti-communism that the Cold War fostered, with Chinese radicals beaten into submission by a racist government on one side and a resurgence of confidence among conservative Chinese merchants and their informers on the other.[115]

Darwin's Chinese working class

By 1879 Darwin's population was overwhelmingly Chinese, with 3,406 Chinese to just 460 whites.[116] In such a situation, the authorities had to work hard to fan the flames of racism, because the Chinese were mingling with whites and, shock horror, even with the local Larrakia Indigenous people. The press railed against such activities, drawing comparisons with other Asian outposts of the British Empire:

The Chinese labourers are treated in the Hongkong and Straites Settlements in a proper manner. They are kept in their place, both in the day and at night. Europeans do not fraternize and hob nob with them, and thus give them exaggerated ideas of their social importance.[117]

This was a time when the ruling class's most urgent task was to link the port with the recently discovered inland goldfields. So in 1886, 3,000 Chinese workers were employed to build the Pine Creek Railway. The contractor had controversially won the tender on the basis of using Chinese labour. This was supposed to make it cheap and quick, but within weeks the contractors were complaining about the "troublesome" Chinese, who "do not seem disposed to coming to terms".[118]

The labourers engaged in a string of strikes, pushing the project's cost to almost twice its budget, and stretching construction out for almost three years.[119] One group rioted on the Darwin jetty, and threatened to throw the foreman into the water – well before they went anywhere near the railway site.[120] It was a militancy illustrated well in the stories of one labourer, Jimmy Ah Yu, who told his children that during construction of the railway the company attempted to cut wages by 30 percent. The workers responded by getting out their tin-snips and cutting 30 percent off their shovels. The wage cuts were quickly withdrawn.[121]

Darwin's Chinese railway labourers were industrially militant, but they also contributed to a long-ignored anti-racist fight against the government.

By this time, the Board of Health in the Territory was the front line of anti-Chinese racism, waging a campaign of outright ethnic cleansing against the city's Chinese population that continued for over 50 years. For example, at the turn of the century they had a standing policy of denying medical treatment to any Chinese person diagnosed with leprosy, and immediately deporting them.[122] The Board also raided Chinese houses on the pretext of removing "collected human remains",[123] but in fact to sabotage the grieving process of Chinese workers who had lost loved ones and to foster a morbid racist panic about Chinese shanty towns overflowing with ghoulish collections of corpses.

In 1888, the fear-mongering culminated in plans to demolish Darwin's Chinese quarter. The Chinese residents petitioned, but their efforts were ignored and even mocked in the press.[124] Finally, the Chinese railway labourers threatened indefinite and total strike action.[125] Today there is only the tiniest evidence of this strike, but needless to say, the Chinese quarter was left standing.

On 1 January 1911, the Labor federal government took control of the Northern Territory from South Australia – a move that was to have immediate and dramatic impacts on Darwin's Chinese workers because it meant the forceful implementation of the White Australia policy.

Just nine days after the take-over, all the Asian workers on the Darwin docks were sacked by order of the federal minister.[126] In practice, this meant almost the entire stevedoring workforce was laid off. They were quickly joined by Asian miners, agricultural workers and fishing crews – many of whom had lived in Darwin for decades, some even having been born there. All were sacked, but they didn't go quietly. They protested, they petitioned, and in February, dozens of unemployed Chinese and Malays marched on the government residence to demand work.[127] But the odds were stacked against them, and they lost the fight for their jobs.

Within a year the white workers who took over the wharves were being recruited into Darwin's first registered trade union, which upheld a ban on Chinese membership. Nonetheless, the difficulty of finding white labour did allow Chinese workers to re-enter the wharf jobs.

In 1913 the unionised white wharfies struck for higher pay. Despite everything they'd been through, the Chinese workers who had been forced from those very jobs and refused union membership now steadfastly refused to scab. One journalist who visited the docks hoping to file a racist report instead conceded: "Alas, the only friend of the union is the Chinese!"[128]

Journalists at the time tried to explain this as simply a result of intimidation by the white wharfies.[129] In fact, there is no evidence of intimidation or fear. On the contrary, the Chinese workers were acting this way precisely because they were principled unionists. The truth is revealed in a lonely newspaper report that bothers to put the Chinese side of the story:

"Strike matters are unchanged. The Chinese Teamsters will not work. They say they have been assisted by the union in raising the rates of pay for their countrymen, and they desire to stand by the union."[130]

Soon after, a number of Darwin's Chinese wharfies were briefly supporters of the anti-racist and revolutionary Industrial Workers of the World.[131] And in 1922, when the white wharfies were on strike again, a travelling bourgeois layabout claimed to have seen Chinese men amongst the scabs. A furious Chinese worker responded in a letter to the union newspaper, demanding he

"...unreservedly apologise for his base slander of the Chinese of this town. We...defy [him] or anyone else to point to a single instance where Chinese have scabbed on white workers."

The alacrity with which a large number of white men rushed in and grabbed the bread out of the mouths of the wharf labourers is to the Chinese mind most disgusting."[132]

The stories covered so far have only involved men. That's partly because almost all the Chinese migrants pre-Federation were male, and partly because after Federation the White Australia policy drove the total resident Chinese population down and severely hindered anyone else from coming – male or female.[133] So according to the ABS, in 1881 some 38,533 people in Australia identified as Chinese, of whom just 259 – or 0.7 percent – were women. By 1921 the total had reduced by almost half to 17,157 with 1,146 women – which is a huge jump but still just 6.7 percent of the Chinese total.[134] The White Australia policy continued to have a dramatic impact overall, and by 1947 the total number of people in Australia identified as Chinese was down to just 6,594.[135]

However, one important figure we do have some detail on is a woman called Lena Lee. Lee was a Darwin-born middle class woman, just 22 years old when the local branch of the Kuomintang was founded in 1924. She quickly became the organisation's vice-president and remained so until her suicide in 1930 at the age of just 28. What drove her to suicide is obviously open to conjecture, but a leading expert on Darwin Chinese political and labour history, Julia Martinez, makes a strong argument based on Lee's suicide letters that her actions reflected a deep despair at the trajectory of

the Kuomintang. By this time, Lee had witnessed the purging of Kuomintang labour radicals and the obscene concessions that the Kuomintang made to Japanese imperialism inside China. She wrote:

"I as a member have always tried to do my best towards the party but recently as the result of some alteration I am concerned considerably. So therefore I leave this note to inform you our loyal comrades that I will have to depart from you all forever. Those who are intelligent will follow Sun Yet Sen."[136]

Lee's prominent role in Darwin politics caused no end of controversy. She was, after all, an opinionated young woman, and a Chinese one at that. But in addition, she was staunchly pro-union and known to be on comradely terms with communists. You can imagine the scandal. One of her critics from inside the whites-only union argued, accurately, that:

"[T]he old Conservative Chinese of Darwin will have nothing to do with this association [the Kuomintang] whose chief say-so is a woman. Rightly it is pointed out that these people do not represent Chinese manners and thought."[137]

The Darwin Kuomintang's secretary, a working class man by the name of Gee Ming Ket whose father had been forced into unemployment by the 1911 White Australia purges, launched a stinging rebuttal in the paper's letters page:

"Thankful are we that the majority of young Australian-born Chinese are joining our Society [the Kuomintang], but the Old Conservative Chinese are naturally opposed to any change. When did the Conservatives of any country do any real and permanent good for the working classes? The Conservative Chinese - like all other Conservatives - hate change. That sort of conservatism has held China in bonds of slavery for centuries."[138]

It was Lee's involvement with the workers' movement that marked the real divisions in the Darwin Chinese community. The Chinese merchant class, well and truly ensconced in the Darwin establishment, were in turn disgusted and terrified by the implications of her activity.

Under the leadership of Lena Lee the Darwin Kuomintang organised Chinese workers and in 1930 Kuomintang members marched in communist-organised rallies against unemployment.[139] Most importantly, in 1927 the Kuomintang and the CPA crystallised a joint commitment to overturn the whites-only membership clause of the newly formed Northern Australian Workers Union (NAWU).[140] The struggle to overturn the ban took almost a decade, only achieving victory some years after Lena Lee's death. But by that time, the Kuomintang had long since been purged of its labour ties. It was now the CPA alone who fought for the rights of Chinese workers and offered them solidarity when they resisted racism.

It's worth taking a moment here to discuss the concept of "white" as it applied to the NAWU membership rules. The union's rules allowed membership to so-called "half castes", as long they were Australian-born. This meant that in the 1930s, Darwin's docks were a closed NAWU shop - but nonetheless were far from "white" in practice. It included people like Arthur Tye, of Chinese-Anglo background, and Charlie Snape, of Chinese-Aboriginal background. In the docks' railway sorting shed the NAWU delegate was Jimmy Ah Mat, whose father was a Malay pearl-diver and mother a Torres Strait Islander. Also working the docks were the Cubillo brothers, former Wobblies whose father was a Filipino pearl-diver and whose mother was of mixed Scottish-Aboriginal descent.[141]

But the NAWU rules still banned membership to many coloured workers, and communists in the union fought relentlessly against this racism. At union meetings from 1928 on, CPA activists regularly moved to scrap the NAWU's colour ban, sometimes getting between 40 and 50 percent of

the vote.[142]

Finally, the racist ban was defeated on the shop floor at sites where communist influence was strong. So in 1934 Chinese construction labourers at the Darwin aerodrome site attempted to gain membership in the NAWU. The white workers at the aerodrome site were solidly unionised, led by communist delegates, and supported the Chinese workers. At first the NAWU organiser refused to let the Chinese join. But the workers on-site refused to relent, and their persistent calls for equal membership forced the NAWU to offer a compromise – the Chinese couldn't join but they could take out second-class "permits". These would cost the same as a full membership and would have allowed the Chinese to work on the closed shop site, but it refused them any vote in union affairs. The aerodrome workers, both Chinese and white, stuck to their guns and voted to demand full and equal membership rights. NAWU members at the Golden Dyke mine, where communist influence was also strong passed a similar resolution.[143] The pressure was building and finally from the mid-1930s Chinese workers were allowed to join the union.[144]

Indentured Chinese labourers and Nauru in the 1940s

Since Australia seized Nauru from Germany during the First World War, the island had remained an important piece of Australian capitalism's foothold in the Pacific. But in 1942, during the Second World War, Australia was driven out by the advancing Japanese forces. This was a significant loss for Australian imperialism, because in addition to the tiny island's strategic airstrip, its mines had provided vital phosphate for war munitions.

Under the regime of the Australian-owned British Phosphate Commission (BPC), the mines had been worked by indentured labourers from China. Now, as Australian forces fled, they took 557 of the Chinese labourers to the Australian mainland to continue their indentured labour in the tungsten mines of the Northern Territory (tungsten also being a vital component of war munitions). This Chinese workforce included "boilermakers, blacksmiths and coppersmiths, carpenters, electricians, and other industrial tradesmen, as well as tailors and laundrymen".[145]

From the moment they left Nauru the Chinese workers staged a protracted campaign of industrial action and resistance, staging their first strike as they passed through the fitting location of Broken Hill, and then granting themselves a six-week unscheduled "stopover" in Port Augusta while they won a collective agreement. While there they went shopping and even participated in concerts with the locals.[146]

But upon reaching their destination the government tore up the agreement, particularly in relation to food and accommodation. The workers were given unpolished rice and meals contaminated with sand, while their water was rationed and their shelter was open to the elements. Needless to say, their white government-appointed overseers were given the exact opposite – shelter, clean food and endless water supplies. Australian authorities denied union officials entry to the site in an attempt to prevent the labourers from reorganising.[147] Their efforts were futile.

As the months went by tungsten production ground to a halt, with figures later putting it at just 17 percent of pre-war levels.[148] The labourers staged an endless string of go-slows and strikes, and built themselves a serious strike headquarters. The authorities tried in vain to break the union through severe measures, including locking up the food stores in hopes of starving the miners back to work. But in response, the miners put their digging skills to use and built themselves a cool-room, dug into the side of a hill, and proceeded to fill it with the meat of animals they caught themselves.[149]

After almost two years, the frustrated government gave up and shifted the workers elsewhere, even sending some into the US army – at wages three to four times the standard service rate.[150] Keen to cover up whole affair, the police demolished the site in 1943.

“This involved burning the residences, spraying piles of domestic refuse with oil before burning, and removing the remains with a bulldozer... Today, little survives of the camps, yet the adobe walls of the police station still stand.”[151]

After the war, the victorious Australian imperial forces retook control of Nauru, and continued to pillage every last skerrick of phosphate from the place. But the Nauru connection has another important chapter. A year before they used troops to break the 1949 miners’ strike at Broken Hill, the Chifley Labor government sent troops to break a miners’ strike on Nauru. In 1948, 1,500 indentured Chinese miners rose against their Australian exploiters. Arming themselves with stones, axes and tools, the miners barricaded themselves in their quarters. They stoned company officials and cops who tried to break the barricade.[152]

Early reports suggested the disturbances had resulted from gambling, a common racist stereotype and an inadequate explanation. But a few months later, in May 1949, as Mao’s Red Army rushed toward Beijing, authorities gave a clear indication of radical political activities among the Chinese labourers. In a communication with the Department of Foreign Territories, the general manager of the BPC demanded that the Nauru Administration be provided with tear gas before the imminent arrival of the next batch of Chinese indentured labourers. He insisted that “in view of the march of events in China, the possibility of unrest among Chinese cannot be ignored”. The Department agreed with this assessment and reacted swiftly, with the acting minister approving a top secret cache of repressive hardware including 50 respirators and 500 generators of tear gas Lachrymatory No 2 MK4. Within a year Mao’s revolution had succeeded and the new Menzies government was launching its anti-communist crusade. The Chinese on Nauru came in for particular attention. The secretary of the Department warned Menzies that the Chinese labourers on Nauru were “communist inspired”, while the island’s director of police claimed “a good percentage of the Chinese here are communist”. In 1951 the Menzies government dramatically escalated their repressive powers on Nauru, arming the administration and the BPC to the teeth. In a series of secret shipments marked “merchandise”, the island authorities took possession of some fifty .303 rifles, six Owen submachine guns and three Bren guns, along with bayonets and other accessories – all of which was to serve the sole purpose of putting down any future rebellion by the Chinese labourers.[153]

Whatever their aims, the rebellious miners on Nauru in 1948 were brutally crushed. Australian armed forces shot their way into the barracks and killed four of them, shooting and bayonetting them dead[154] on that same sun-burned rock where today Australia outsources a refugee concentration camp. And just a few short years later no phosphate remained anyway.

Conclusion

Chinese workers in Australian history have consistently been painted as separate from the rest of the class, described in terms that position them in conflict with white workers – who are, by inference, the “real” working class.

But where militants, both Chinese and white, have had influence they have argued for and even managed to forge unity. Most tellingly, at the highpoints of struggle unionised Chinese workers clearly saw themselves as part of the working class movement. Witness their solidarity with the maritime strike in 1890, for example.

To the extent that there were barriers between Chinese and white workers, it was a consequence of laws expressly designed to separate them. As those laws were finally wound back, the existence of an identifiably “Chinese” labour force was increasingly insignificant.

In 1973 the Whitlam government formally ended the White Australia policy, with the Fraser government later introducing the policy of multiculturalism.[155] One of the first manifestations of the new era was the 1975 plan by Melbourne Lord Mayor Ron Walker to transform the Little Bourke Street Chinese precinct into a so-called “Chinatown” full of tawdry Orientalist architecture. Walker described it as Melbourne’s “first attempt to develop an ethnic quarter”.[156] Despite the racism and the explicit attempt to ghettoise the Chinese residents, the Chinese Professional and Businessmen’s Association of Victoria wholeheartedly endorsed the idea. After all, there was tourism profit to be made.

But the majority of Chinese residents and small businesses in the quarter were disgusted at the prospect of being turned into a tourist freak show, replete with “traditional costumes”. As one oppositional Chinese resident said: “They can dress people up with buck teeth and coolie heads as long as they don’t say it’s Chinese.”[157] The residents formed their own anti-Chinatown committee. At their first large public meeting they voted to demand immediate cancellation of the project because it was an insult to the Chinese people, and to reject an offer from the Lord Mayor to nominate a representative for the project’s steering committee.[158]

Soon they had collected 300 signatures opposing the project, but could not budge the council or the state government. Finally they took their grievances to the militant construction union, the Builders Labourers Federation.[159] The BLF banned the Chinatown construction work, demanding the council consult with Chinese residents over the designs. Refusing to budge, the council decided instead to scrap the project altogether. It sat uncompleted for another eight years until a subsequent government rekindled the idea and finished it, this time in consultation with the residents.[160]

With Chinatown’s business elite backing the government, the battle over Melbourne’s Chinatown in 1976 also reminds us that racism in Australia has always drawn sharp class lines. So today the Australian government oversees a modern indentured labour system in the form of the 457 visa, while the rich can buy themselves permanent residency for \$5 million through the Premium Investor Visa scheme.[161]

Such hypocrisy has a long history. In the 1880s, while the government was infamously refusing entry to hundreds of working class Chinese – like those on the Afghan, some of whom actually lived here – they were simultaneously sucking up to wealthy Chinese Australian merchants like Lowe Kong Meng and Louis Ah Mouy. They appointed Kong Meng a commissioner for the Royal Melbourne Exhibition, and both men were invited to join the Board of Directors of the Commercial Bank of Australia.[162]

Victoria’s liberal press gushed over these capitalists, often attacking working class Chinese in the very same breath:

“Kong Meng is a Chinese citizen resident in Melbourne. He is a man of great importance, holding equal sway amongst his countrymen with that of a petty prince in India. Mr. Meng is rich and . . . highly respected... Kong Meng is superior to filth [i.e. the mass of Chinese!], and “comes out strong”. He waits upon the architect of the Parliament houses and orders a design for a building... There arises a beautiful edifice with a front of elaborately carved freestone. Kong in short is soon to be master and owner of a really handsome building but – alas for his taste – it is built in Little Bourke-street.”[163]

The real history that demands to be written is not that of the Chinese merchants, but of the Chinese

workers; not least to commemorate the fallen working class fighters in places like Nauru, Darwin and Fremantle, but also for broader reasons.

In the 1970s a new wing of the Victorian Trades Hall was built as a tribute to the long overlooked role of women in the working class movement, and it was specifically dedicated to the fighting women of the tailoresses' union of the 1880s. A similar silence has been observed towards workers of Chinese background. This silence has only helped foster the myth that Chinese workers in Australia were invariably passive and cheap, and therefore that they acted as a competitor to "white" wages and conditions. This is a racist lie that suits the bosses' view of the world. It is after all, the bosses themselves who have insisted time and time again throughout this country's history that they have the right to pay some workers less than others, or to put them on substandard contracts or substandard visas, solely on the basis of their "race".

Chinese workers in Australia have fought with militancy and determination. They forged new chapters in Australian working class history. But all of this has been ignored for too long. And from their early overwhelming support of the Taiping rebels, through their strikes in support of the Chinese workers' revolution of 1925-1927 and their close collaboration with communists in the 1930s and 1940s, their history is also one of radical politics and radical organisations. The thread that runs through the militant struggles I've described is more than just a string of disputes over wages and conditions. Instead it encompasses working class industrial struggles against racism, against war and even at times under the banner of revolution. It is therefore a part of our revolutionary movement, of our own working class history. It's well past time we remembered the comrades who made it happen.

Liam Ward

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Notes

[1] Willard 1967, pp197-198.

[2] Markey 1996, p346.

[3] Markey 1985, p20.

[4] Small 1997. In his important piece on the 1873 Clunes riot, Marxist historian Jerome Small includes a reappraisal of anti-Chinese measures during the 1850s Victorian gold rush that makes this case well.

[5] The policies had a complex basis in the broader agenda of the Australian ruling class, but for now I am focusing narrowly on White Australia and the working class. For the broader agenda see Griffiths 2006 and Armstrong and Bramble 2007.

[6] Beaton 2007, p43.

[7] For example: Burgmann 1985; Small 1997, Griffiths 2006 and Griffiths 2009.

[8] In particular: Fitzgerald 2007, Kuo and Brett 2013 and Kuo 2013.

[9] Public Records Office of Victoria, 2014.

[10] Although the city was never known to the Chinese as “Canton” and was officially named Guangzhou in 1918, European references to “Canton” continued until the late twentieth century. When referring to historical sources, we have used the name they used, while acknowledging its imperialist origins.

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- [38] Rickard 1983.
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- [40] Yong 1977, p65.
- [41] Markus 1974, p8.
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- [43] The Argus, 1 October 1903.
- [44] The Argus, 10 October 1903.
- [45] Northern Territory Times and Gazette, 9 October 1903.
- [46] The Advertiser, 16 November 1903.
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- [48] Zeehan and Dundas Herald, 17 November 1903.
- [49] The Advertiser, 17 November 1903.
- [50] The West Australian, 18 November 1903.
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- [52] The Register, 19 November 1903.
- [53] The Argus, 30 November 1903.

- [54] The Advertiser, 19 November 1903.
- [55] Sydney Morning Herald, 3 December 1903.
- [56] The Argus, 1 October 1903.
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- [58] Loh 1994, p16.
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- [69] See for example: Sparrow and Sparrow 2001, pp154-156, Markus 1974.
- [70] Louey Pang's importance is detailed in Yong 1977 and Kuo and Brett 2013.
- [71] Armstrong and Bramble 2007, p40.
- [72] Sydney Morning Herald, 5 March 1879.
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[82] See Benton 2007, p74; Kuo and Brett 2013, p50.

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[90] Barrier Miner, 8 July 1927.

[91] The Adelaide Chronicle, 16 July 1927.

[92] Townsville Daily Bulletin, 7 July 1927.

[93] Fitzgerald 2007, pp139-140.

[94] Cottle 2000.

[95] A noted strong swimmer, Wong drowned in mysterious circumstances in 1948 after falling from a raft on Lake Boga, Victoria. To this day, Wong's family believe the Australian state murdered him for his political activities, particularly his role in championing Indonesian independence. See Maramis 2010 p79.

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[97] The Argus, 25 October 1937.

[98] Cottle 2000.

[99] Cottle 2000.

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[104] The Mirror, 27 August 1949.

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[106] Cottle, "Forgotten Foreign Militants", p145.

[107] Fitzpatrick and Cahill 1981, p182.

[108] Sydney Morning Herald, 29 November 1946.

[109] Fitzgerald 1996, p142.

[110] Cottle and Keys 2007.

[111] Zheng1999, p41.

[112] Fitzgerald 1996, p142.

[113] Fitzgerald 1996, p143.

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[116] Martinez 1999, p55.

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[121] O'Neil 2005.

[122] Chua 2010, p60.

[123] South Australian Register, 31 October 1887.

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[126] Powell 1988, p155.

[127] Queensland Times, 2 March 1911

[128] The Brisbane Courier, 8 May 1913

[129] The Register, 10 May 1913.

[130] The Brisbane Courier, 9 May 1913

[131] Benton 2007, p85.

[132] Northern Standard, 12 September 1922.

[133] Notwithstanding this, recent research has brought to light many histories of Chinese women in Australia. Kamp 2013 gives a detailed overview of the key texts on this front, and makes a compelling argument against the traditional "passive wife" thesis. Instead, she identifies a strong complementary history of migration to Australia by Chinese women acting apparently independently of a husband. Clearly some proportion of these women would have joined the ranks of the working

class here, even if they came from money in China.

[134] ABS, 1925, *The Chinese in Australia*, cat. no. 1301.0.

[135] Fitzgerald 1996, p40.

[136] Julia Martinez, "Patriotic Chinese Women: Followers of Sun Yat-sen in Darwin, Australia" in Lee and Lee 2011, p210.

[137] Martinez, "Patriotic Chinese Women", in Lee and Lee 2011, p208.

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[140] Benton 2007, p85.

[141] Martinez 1999, pp193-194.

[142] Julia Martinez, "The Limits of Solidarity: The North Australian Workers Union as Advocate of Aboriginal Assimilation", in Nile and Rowse 2005.

[143] Brian 2001, pp141-142.

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[148] *Sydney Morning Herald*, 22 March 1944.

[149] Rolls 1996, pp474-476.

[150] Jones 2005.

[151] Paterson, Gill and Kennedy 2003, p84.

[152] *The Mail*, 17 July 1948.

[153] Louis 1992.

[154] *Townsville Daily Bulletin*, 2 July 1949.

[155] The politics of these changes are explained well by Lee Ack 2012.

[156] *The Age*, 30 September, 1975.

[157] *The Age*, 19 January 1976.

[158] *The Age*, 21 April 1976.

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[162] Welch 2003, p80.

[163] The Star, 16 March 1861.

P.S.

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