

The Union Carbide Factory Occupation of 1979

Brendan McGloin
School of Social Sciences & Psychology
Victoria University
Fourth Year Honours Thesis
2012

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Disclaimer

This thesis is my own original research and has not been previously submitted for academic accreditation.

To the best of my knowledge and belief, the above statements are true.

Brendan McGloin

18 October, 2012

Professor Phillip Deery
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Abbreviations

AAESDA: Association of Architects, Engineers, Surveyors and Draughtsmen of Australia

ACTU: Australian Council of Trade Unions

ALP: Australian Labor Party

AMWU: Amalgamated Metal Workers Union

AMWSU: Amalgamated Metal Workers and Shipwrights Union

AWU: Australian Workers' Union

BLF: Builders Labourers Federation

BWIU: Building Workers Industrial Union

CNT-FAI: National Confederation of Labour/Iberian Anarchist Federation

CPA: Communist Party of Australia

ETU: Electrical Trades Union

FEDFA: Federated Engine Drivers and Firemen's Association

FIA: Federation Ironworkers Association

ILO: International Labour Organisation

IWW: Industrial Workers of the World

MTIA: Metal Trades Industry Association

PRA: Petroleum Refineries of Australia

SWP: Socialist Workers Party

UCS: Upper Clyde Shipbuilders

Synopsis

This thesis examines a seminal but largely ignored episode in Australian labour history. In 1979, the Altona Petrochemical Complex was the scene of a historic materialisation of class struggle, when 52 workers occupied the Union Carbide plant for a period of 51 days. It was, and remains, the longest factory occupation in Australian history. Occupations, generally, represent not only a challenge to the immediate party involved but a fundamental critique of the existing social, political and economic order, and in that sense must be understood within a broader milieu of resistance to the imperatives of power. Furthermore, the act of occupation is an occurrence that can be designated as a “weapon of the weak.” *Factory* occupations are the highest and most audacious form of occupation as they, like all occupations, challenge the supposed inviolability of property, but transcend the potentialities of other occupations by challenging the property and privileges of the ruling class. The Union Carbide Sit-in Strike constituted one such challenge. This thesis, which is situated within the broader narrative of “history from below”, has been enabled by the recent acquisition of the private papers of one of the leading participants. Until now, these archival sources have not been the subject of any previous scholarly study.

Chapter 1: Literature Review and Historical Background

Literature Review

The 51 day factory occupation that took place in 1979 at Union Carbide – one of the seven petrochemical companies located within the Altona Petrochemical Complex – is a little known event in the annals of Australian labour history, despite possessing being the longest domestic factory occupation to date.¹ In duration, the Altona occupation surpassed the United States' historic 44-day Flint Sit-down Strike of 1936-1937, the subject of innumerable studies.² The sole study, which is partly fictional, of this seminal episode, is *Sitting In*, by novelist and poet, Barry Hill.³ What is also of significance is that the event sits upon the cusp of

¹ "Factory" occupations and "workplace" occupations are used coterminously in this paper. Within those terms are included "sit-in" strikes, "sit-down" strikes (the US equivalent) and "work-in" strikes. Peter provides other descriptions for the sit-in strike including "crossed-arms" and "stay-in" strike, amongst others. See George E. Peter, "Sit Down," *American Speech*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (Feb., 1937), pp. 31-33. Elements of the media also used the term "live-in" and "lock-in" during the Union Carbide Occupation. Both "Union Carbide Occupation" and "Union Carbide Sit-in Strike" will be used to describe the industrial dispute in 1979 in Altona.

² See Sidney Fine, "The General Motors Sit-Down Strike: A Re-examination," *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 70, No. 3 (Apr., 1965), pp. 691-713; Kenneth B. West, "On the Line": Rank and File Reminiscences of Working Conditions and the General Motors Sit-down Strike of 1936-37," *Michigan Historical Review*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (Spring, 1986), pp. 57-82; Genora (Johnson) Dollinger, *Striking Flint: Remembering the 1936-1937 General Motors Sit-Down Strike* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2010); William Weinstone, *The Great Sit-Down Strike* (New York: Workers' Liberty Press, 1937); Kenneth B. West, "Standard Cotton Products and the General Motors Sit-down Strike: Some "Forgotten Men," *Michigan Historical Review*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (Spring, 1988), pp. 57-73. Also Pope, although approaching from a different perspective, discusses the Flint occupation in detail in Jim Pope, "Illinois Worker Lawmaking, Sit-Down Strikes, and the Shaping of American Industrial Relations, 1935-1958," *Law and History Review*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (Spring, 2006), pp. 45-113; and Lynch looks at some of the songs that emerged during the occupation in Timothy P. Lynch, "Sit down! Sit down!": Songs of the General Motors Strike, 1936-1937," *Michigan Historical Review*, Vol. 22, No. 2, 100th Anniversary of the Automotive Industry (Fall, 1996), pp. 1-47. Others, like the study by Michael Torigian and Walter Linder, are discussed in greater detail later in this thesis.

³ See Barry Hill, *Sitting In* (Melbourne: William Heinemann, 1991). Hill is the son of Neville Hill, Amalgamated Metal Workers and Shipwrights Union (AMWSU) organizer, one of the protagonists in this study, and on whose private papers this thesis partially relies. The AMWSU is known – and

several key developments, both domestic and international, and can be understood within multiple social and historical narratives. Within Australia, the union movement's struggle for the 35-hour week had been conducted since 1972, and the occupation can be perceived as an introductory spar in the twilight period of that similarly under-researched campaign.⁴ Both domestically and internationally, the period marked the end of the labour militancy that had characterised the 1960s and 1970s, and signified the transition towards neoliberalism, which was both a consequence and a cause of these processes. More significant is the fact that, unlike other industrialised nations, factory occupations are a rare commodity within the broader outlines of Australian industrial disputes. One of the only preceding factory occupations in Melbourne occurred at the South Melbourne Gasworks in 1937, and at the beginning of that tumultuous decade, a coal mine in South Gippsland's Korumburra was the scene of a workers' occupation.⁵

The recurrence of "occupation" and "occupy" within contemporary parlance is notable. Factory occupations, although differing in form from the public occupations of late, share analogous functions and historical peculiarities. We could understand occupations, generally, as an act of the propertyless against the propertied, and of the powerless against the powerful. Power and property are, through the act of occupation, transferred from the possession of the few into

has been in the past – as the AMWU.) Neville Hill was a militant member of the trade union movement, with *The Metalworker* claiming Hill held the record for planned stoppages in the industry with 104 stoppages in 7 days at the Altona Petrochemical Complex in 1960. See Henry McCarthy, "It's There You'll Find Neville Hill," *The Metalworker*, Vol. 4, No. 11, December, 1983.

⁴ There is certainly scope for that particular campaign to be studied in detail, as very little historical research has been conducted into those events. One source was a chapter "A Union Revival" in Tom O'Lincoln, *Years of Rage: Social Conflicts in the Fraser Era* (Melbourne: Bookmarks Australia, 1993); The other is from the paper of the Democratic Socialist Perspective: James Vassilopoulos, "A Shorter Working Week: Lessons from Recent History," *Green Left Weekly*, 20 May, 1998.

⁵ Like the Altona occupation, neither event has the subject of scholarly research. The only literature on the Gasworks occupation is a pamphlet published by the Gas Employees' Union. C Crofts, *Melbourne's First Stay-in Strike* (Melbourne: Gas Employees Union, 1937). On the occupation at Korumburra, there is no extant literature, but it did provide the setting for Richard Lowenstein's 1984 film *Strikebound*.

that of the many. So property, private or public space – depending on circumstance – and the “right” of possession are central to what an occupation engenders.

The sit-in strike was an invention of the labour militancy and workplace syndicalism of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) in the United States at the turn of the twentieth century. It is widely recognised that in 1906, at the General Electric plant in Schenectady, New York, the factory occupation was born, with 3000 employees occupying the factory in support of three IWW members that had been targeted by management.⁶ However, IWW historian Fred Thompson has suggested that Cincinnati brewery workers occupied their factory in an industrial dispute in 1884.⁷

Occupations are in no sense a recent or new phenomenon, nor are they solely a product of industrial society. George E. Peter provides examples that took place in ancient times, from an occupation in Aristophanes’ *Lysistrata*, when the women initiated a sort of sit-in strike in an attempt to force their husbands home from the Peloponnesian War, to one that Achilles and his Myrmidons organised in Homeric times.⁸ He also notes a kind of trade-union agreement in the city of Sardis in 459CE where the builders and artisans agreed not to call what could be described as a sit-in strike. In more recent times, but before industrialisation, landless peasants occupied aristocratic land on occasion during periods of revolt. Occupations, in that sense, are a fundamental challenge to the supposed inviolability of property.

Much as the Occupy Movement’s occupations have arisen in waves, spreading nationally from Wall Street and then internationally, factory occupations followed a similar trajectory. Factory occupations have also erupted across the world almost simultaneously – particularly during periods of prevalent economic and social unrest. The reasons for this, aside from the unrest, are twofold: firstly, the propaganda spreading from successful occupations; and secondly, in certain situations, occupation is the workers’ sole recourse,

⁶ Fred Thompson, *The IWW: Its First 50 Years: 1905-1955; The History of an Effort to Organise the Working Class* (Chicago: Industrial Workers of the World, 1956), p.28.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.7.

⁸ Peter, “Sit Down.”

particularly if other weapons in the workers' arsenal, such as a standard strike or a go-slow, are deemed ineffective or have been exhausted. This was certainly the case at Union Carbide, where the workers were *forced* to adopt the occupation due to management policy, a key factor which this thesis will examine. In that sense, occupations can be both offensive weapons – on the part of the workers – or defensive strategic decisions, as the Union Carbide example demonstrates.

Alongside the Altona occupation, and the struggle for the 35-hour week, factory occupations are also an under-researched phenomenon, with no broader study – dealing with some of the larger political and theoretical questions, and discerning shared characteristics or differences – currently available.⁹ Arguably, the most comprehensive account is Ness and Azzellini's *Ours to Master: Workers' Control from the Commune to the Present*, which discusses many of the key factory occupations from 1871 to today. However, it deals largely with occupations where the workers assumed control over the means of production – if that was their intent – paying less attention to occupations, such as the Union Carbide dispute, that aimed solely for increased wages and or conditions.¹⁰ However, it does include some occupations where workers' self-management was not the aim: the US auto-industry occupations of the 1930s, for instance, and some of the UK occupations between 1971-1975. But the foundational basis of the study is as a history of workers' self-management of production: factory occupations are but one element, albeit an integral one, of workers' control. Although there is a causal relationship between the two, some factory occupations, like that at Union Carbide in 1979, did not perceive self-management of production as an objective. The occupation – with the aim of preventing production within the factory, as is the case with strikes generally – was sufficient.

⁹ "Sit-down strike" will only be used when referring to US factory occupations, particularly as there are several well-known and well-researched American factory occupations. A "work-in" strike is similar to a factory operating under workers' self-management of production: the workers continue production within the factory, and organise it themselves under a cooperative basis.

¹⁰ Immanuel Ness and Dario Azzellini (eds.), *Ours to Master and to Own: Workers' Control from the Commune to the Present* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2011).

Contextually, several studies shed light on the nature of Australian trade unionism in 1979, and beforehand. Bramble and Bowden each provide a comprehensive overview of Australian unionism during the period and beyond.¹¹ On unionism in 1979 itself, Bob Carr provides a substantial outline of the complexities, challenges and significance of events of that year; yet there is no mention, whatsoever, of what was arguably the most salient industrial dispute: the Union Carbide Occupation.¹² The *Journal of Industrial Relations* contains a yearly account of trade unionism in Australia, beginning in 1962, from which the study by Carr is the 1979 edition. These cover the period 1972-1981 of the broader 35-hours movement. From these sources two relevant processes are evident. Firstly, 30% of the Australian workforce had engaged in industrial disputes over wages during 1979, a substantial amount, signifying a persistent militancy within sectors of the Australian workforce.¹³ Secondly, 1979 was on the cusp of the transition toward a neo-liberal economy and 1981 marked the decline of Australian trade unionism as it was in the pre and post-war era.¹⁴ This transition was conditioned by several factors: the Hawke-Keating reforms, which ushered in economic-rationalism by removing tariffs, floating the dollar, and the Prices and Incomes Accord, the latter having a significant impact on industrial disputes; the growth of white collar unionists by 82%, as the predominantly manufacturing economy of the post-war era moved towards the service economy of today; and finally, and significantly, the emergence in the early 1980s of right-wing “think-tanks,” such as the HR Nicholls society, mirroring these occurrences overseas. These institutions, filled with employers and their representatives bent on destroying the welfare state and the strength of the union movement, began to

¹¹ Tom Bramble, *Trade Unionism in Australia : A History from Flood to Ebb Tide* (Port Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Bradley Bowden, “The Rise and Decline of Australian Unionism: A History of Industrial Labour from the 1820s to 2010,” *Labour History*, No. 100, May 2011, pp.51-82.

¹² Bob Carr, “Australian Trade Unionism in 1979,” *Journal of Industrial Relations*, 1980, 22, pp.98-103.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Bowden, “The Rise and Decline of Australian Unionism.”

exercise significant political clout, seriously affecting many aspects contingent to a militant trade union movement.¹⁵

In Britain, similar processes were underway. Ken Coates' *Work-ins, Sit-ins and Industrial Democracy* explores the mass wave of factory occupations that occurred in the 1970s in Britain, with over 150,000 workers involved in approximately 200 factory occupations between 1971 and 1975 alone.¹⁶ In that sense, early 1970s Britain was very similar to the events that occurred in the United States in the mid to late 1930s. Coates, like Ness and Azzellini, also situates factory occupations within the framework of workplace democracy. Although knowledge of the events in the UK during this period is not alluded to by the Union Carbide workers in *Sitting In*, the multiple parallels that exist industrially, economically, culturally and otherwise between 1970s Britain and Australia, and the proximity, time-wise, to the Union Carbide occupation, indicate that Coates' study is of particular relevance. Moreover, Coates identifies several crucial themes which are comparable to the workers' experiences – and the wider social and economic implications – of the Union Carbide dispute.

The economic climate of early 1970s Britain, prior to the OPEC embargo, the Winter of Discontent, and the ensuing rise of Thatcher later that decade, is inextricably linked to the militancy of the British workers' movement, just as high inflation and unemployment in the mid to late 1970s influenced events in Australia.¹⁷ In a generalised sense, the workers' movements in Britain and Australia during the 1970s shared numerous similarities. Neither movement had been attacked, as they would be in the late 1970s and through the 1980s and thereafter, by neo-liberalism's class warfare ethic. Significantly, both movements

¹⁵ Indeed, the Institute of Public Affairs – arguably Australia's most preeminent right-wing think-tank today – published a scathing critique of the AMWSU's 1979 booklet, *Australia Ripped Off*, which demanded industrial democracy and a policy of nationalisation in industry. See "Dangerous Propaganda," *IPA Review*, April/June 1979, Vol.33, No. 2. The rise of think-tanks engaging in general class warfare through a neoliberal agenda is discussed in Damien C. Cahill, *The Radical Neo-liberal Movement as a Hegemonic Force within Australian Society, 1976-1996*, PhD Thesis, University of Wollongong, 2004.

¹⁶ Ken Coates, *Work-ins, Sit-ins and Industrial Democracy* (Nottingham: Spokesman Publishing, 1981), p.12.

¹⁷ Carr, "Australian Trade Unionism in 1979."

perceived the labour movement, the economy, and society more generally, still very much within the post-war industrial milieu. Indeed, many industries had yet to be exported overseas, both perceived the post-war consensus as a central success of the workers' struggle against capital over the preceding century, and still envisioned society as progressing towards wider social justice and equality.¹⁸ The 35-hour week movement in Australia was similarly understood as part of labour's struggle for social and industrial justice. It was also located within a longer historical narrative of workers' struggles for fewer hours, much like those of the 8-hour day in the nineteenth century, here and abroad, and the post-war fight for the 40-hour week.¹⁹

Similarly, Coates situates the events of that period within a longer history of British workers' resistance beginning with industrialisation itself, and notes the multitude of strikes culminating in worker-run industrial cooperatives as early as 1844. In Britain, the main occupation occurred at the Upper Clyde Shipbuilders (UCS) in Glasgow in 1971, which unleashed the ensuing wave of industrial militancy – the kind that Thatcherism, later that decade, sought to destroy. Several important distinctions between the events in Altona and those in Glasgow, however, are evident.

Firstly, Union Carbide is, and was at the time, a private corporation – a transnational one, moreover. UCS, conversely, was a majority state, part union, part privately-controlled conglomerate.²⁰ In addition, one of the key facets of the Union Carbide occupation was that, like most strikes, it was – on the part of the

¹⁸ As stated, this is very generalised perspective: Bowden discusses the structural transformations occurring within the Australian labour movement in far more detail and notes a transition occurring – prior to 1979 – to white collar industries, and also notes an overall decline in membership, with 1981 culminating in the final significant decline of the movement. Nonetheless, he recognises the militancy that remained amongst the Australian union movement between 1970 and 1981, with significant wage increases won through strike action. Bowden, “The Rise and Decline of Australian Unionism.”

¹⁹ Australia won the 8-hour day, in 1855-1856. Although more famously recognised was the American struggle from which the annual May Day celebrations (and commiserations) emerged; commemorating the Haymarket Martyrs of 1886: the anarchists blamed for a bombing in Haymarket Square, Chicago, of that year.

²⁰ Coates, “Work-ins,” p.24.

workers – a withdrawal of their labour power, in the hope of forcing a resolution on the part of the employers. At UCS, by contrast, the dispute had begun because the government planned to shut down several of the shipyards, and in that sense, a removal of the workers’ labour power was ineffective – the government had already signified that removal – that was their objective. Therefore, to prevent a lock-out, an occupation was necessary. However, an occupation without production was not sufficient – the employer had no incentive to remove the occupation, as they had planned to cease production regardless. Hence, the occupation at UCS *had* to become a work-in, with workers continuing production, unlike at Union Carbide. This is another recurring rationale: due to the shutting down of factories, factory occupations – much like their public counterparts – have in some countries re-emerged recently, often as a result of neoliberal “reforms,”²¹ and the contemporary economic crisis.²²

Ideologically, the mass occupations that swept across the United States and France between 1936-1939 were inherently reformist in aims, albeit led, in certain cases, by revolutionaries. These occurred during a period of prolonged revolutionary upheaval, class conflict and labour unrest due to the Great Depression. The axiom that “revolutionaries make the best reformers” is manifested by the occupations of that era. Michael Torigian’s study compares the mass unionisation, due to victorious factory occupations, that occurred in the

²¹ Argentina is arguably the scene of some of the most advanced worker-run factory campaigns, with their National Movement of Reclaimed Factories, a result, largely, of the 2001 neoliberal crash in Argentina (although similar occurrences had begun several years earlier). For a documentary on these events, which is devoted to capturing the struggles of laid-off workers taking control of their factories and self-managing production, see Avi Lewis and Naomi Klein, *The Take*, videorecording, Madman, 2005. Other sources are: The Lavaca Collective, *Sin Patron: Stories from Argentina’s Worker-run Factories* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2007) and Molly C. Spieczny, *When Workers Take Over: Reclaimed Factories in Argentina*, Honours Thesis, Princeton University, 2004.

²² Even in the United States, which – at least in the last 30 years – has arguably the most conservative workers movement in the world. Republic Windows and Doors was the scene of a workers occupation in 2008. It is currently a workers’ cooperative – an indication of the success an occupation can achieve. See Kari Lydersen, *Revolt on Goose Island: The Chicago Factory Takeover, and What it Says About the Economic Crisis* (New York: Melville House, 2009).

automotive industries of France and the US in the 1930s.²³ In 1936-1937, the occupations were aimed primarily at winning union recognition in the auto industry, and involved the biggest manufacturers in their respective countries – Renault in France and General Motors in the US (Renault was the largest in the world outside the US). In Paris, as in Flint, the workers' movements were electrified by recent victories in occupations – largely led by communists, anarchists and radicals of various persuasions – and emboldened by national and international events, particularly the Spanish Civil War. Torigian also notes that both countries (but particularly the United States) were effected by the international economic situation created by the Wall Street Crash of 1929, which served as motivation for a militant labour response.

As with the occupations in Britain from 1971-1975, multiple other factors in Paris and Flint correlate to the Union Carbide occupation, although, unlike at UCS, the occupations were not work-ins. Neither occupation aimed directly for revolutionary control over the means of production, although, as will be discussed, this can be a by-product of such radicalism. Likewise, both the French and US examples occurred during a period of widespread radicalism and further occupations. The Union Carbide occupation, by contrast, stood alone, the workers drawing on only one example of a factory occupation – that of the South Melbourne Gas Works in 1937.²⁴ However, the 1970s had witnessed regular and heightened labour-capital conflicts in Australia: the Builders Labourers Federation (BLF) had engaged in their Green-bans campaign throughout the 1970s, unions had pushed for significant changes through the 35-hour week movement, and in 1979 itself, approximately 30% of the workforce had engaged in wages disputes, as earlier noted.²⁵

During the Flint Occupation, one significant aspect was the role of women – something that reoccurred during the occupation at Union Carbide. The wives, girlfriends and mothers of those involved created their own factory committees, including the Women's Auxiliary Brigade and the Women's Emergency Brigade.

²³ Michael Torigian, "The Occupation of the Factories, Paris 1936, Flint 1937,"

Comparative Studies in Society and History, Vol. 41, No. 2 (April, 1999), pp. 324-347.

²⁴ Hill, *Sitting In*, p.77.

²⁵ Carr, "Australian Trade Unionism in 1979."

Donning red berets and arm bands, these committees were established to defend the occupation against state-sanction or vigilante violence.²⁶ Although the nature of the occupation at Union Carbide did not demand similar levels of militancy, the role of women during the dispute was no less vital.

One significant aspect was shared between all the occupations – at Union Carbide, at UCS, and in the US and France in the 1930s: each adopted the factory occupation as a tactic due to its multiple and extensive advantages. In his study of the Flint Sit-Down Strike of 1936-1937, Walter Linder describes the beneficial aspects of factory occupations, and these apply equally across time and place.²⁷ The first is the prevention of strike-breakers from continuing production – a point alluded to by the Union Carbide workers in Hill's *Sitting In*. This also has significant ramifications for morale, in that the workers involved know – not assume or hope – that production has fully ceased. That point is consistent with the second advantage. An occupation, inherently, is far more difficult to remove than an ordinary picket line, and as the basis of a strike is the withdrawal of the workers' labour to prevent the employer from continuing production, the occupation, by nature, ensures that. A third benefit relates to the means of production itself. As workers are inside the factory, rather than blocking entrances, bosses are less likely to violently break the strike as expensive machinery – their expensive machinery, moreover – is in the firing line. So all the usual suspects, particularly from the US labour movement's perspective, "machine guns, tear gas and gangsters" are less likely to be deployed.²⁸ Although this differs in large part from the experiences of the Australian labour movement, which has a far less bloody history, the effectiveness of state repression (and also privately-hired company thugs, and right-wing vigilantes) is still substantially reduced once occupation ensues.

As aforesaid, workers' morale can also be enhanced by the notion of occupation, for multiple reasons. Labour spies, a significant threat – again, especially for the American labour movement – are less effective and numerous

²⁶ Johnson, *Striking Flint*, pp.23-25.

²⁷ Walter Linder, *The Great Flint Sit-down Strike Against GM* (New York: Progressive Labor Party, 1973), pp.2-3.

²⁸ Linder, *The Great Flint Sit-down Strike*, p.3.

due to the parameters of occupation. Additionally, from a public relations perspective, it is less easy to depict the strikers as the antagonists if they are inside the factory or workplace. Ultimately, occupations are far more democratic, due to the workers themselves collectively determining outcomes and strategies, a factor of considerable import, and one that is of direct relevance to this thesis.²⁹

Although not referred to by Linder, from the workers' perspective, the most salutary dimension of the factory occupation is its capacity to bridge the gap between reform and revolution. A significant incentive for any employer, particularly when compared with the alternative, is if their entire property, social standing, and that of others in their class, are under threat. Wages and conditions are minor when contrasted with wholesale proletarian revolt. The President of General Motors, Alfred P. Sloan, incisively identified the dangers inherent to the propertied through occupation, stating that the sit-down strike "denies the right of duly constituted branches of government to interfere...It is revolutionary in its dangers and implications."³⁰

What Sloane was referring to were the organisational requirements that a factory occupation demands. Once authority no longer coerces from above, in its usual arbitrary fashion, decisions must be made collectively, and typically, this will assume the form of direct democracy, including delegates with revocable mandates who are subject to recall. The factory occupation is therefore – almost by default – revolutionary, regardless of intent. This is not solely as a consequence of the workers' increasing radicalisation: strike committees, various managerial requirements, councils created to defend the occupation – all of these require workers' bodies to delegate and administer. Thus, the dichotomy between reformist occupations and those that are revolutionary becomes increasingly indistinct.

The factory occupations that occurred in Russia and Germany following the First World War are prime examples of this, with revolutionary workers' councils emerging from the thousands of factory occupations that occurred during the revolutionary period; yet these developments were primarily a product of the widespread social upheaval and reside within broader histories of

²⁹ Linder, *The Great Flint Sit-down Strike*, p.3.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p.11.

successful or failed social revolutions. It was predominantly in Italy, in particular Turin, that the factory occupation movement reached its peak in 1920.³¹

The workers' councils created during the *Biennio Rosso*, the "Two Red Years," were, for many involved, the embryonic cells of a future society. Although this accorded to the anarchist and syndicalist perspective to "sow in the very belly of capitalist society the seeds of the free producer's groups through which it seems [the] communist and anarchist ideal must come to pass," Marxists, including Antonio Gramsci, were involved. Gramsci aptly recognised workers' councils as the natural form of workers' political and economic organisation for a libertarian socialist order.³² Paolo Spriano's *The Occupation of the Factories: Italy, 1920*, is arguably the most systematic study of this period, along with Gwyn A Williams' *Proletarian Order: Gramsci, Factory Councils and the Origins of Communism in Italy, 1911-1921*.³³ Malatesta's prophetic proposition – that the proletariat would "later pay with tears of blood for the fear that we have instilled in the bourgeoisie"³⁴ – outlines the pivotal nature of factory occupations in providing the nucleus of the workers' political and economic order both within and beyond the capitalist system.

Although quickly developing towards a revolutionary intent, the occupations during the *Biennio Rosso* were initially related to workers' grievances over wages and conditions, the same that have produced occupations elsewhere,

³¹ The events in Italy in 1919-1920 could also be perceived to be part of a narrative of failed social revolutions. The same could be said of the factory councils that emerged in Spain in 1936 and Hungary in 1956.

³² The quote is from Alexander Pelloutier, prominent French exponent of anarcho-syndicalism in the early twentieth century. Alexandre Skirda, *Facing the Enemy: A History of Anarchist Organisation from Proudhon to May 1968* (Oakland: AK Press, 2002), p.66.

³³ Williams also wrote the introduction to Spriano's text. Paolo Spriano, *The Occupation of the Factories: Italy, 1920* (London: Pluto Press, 1975). Williams' title appears to allocate Gramsci prime involvement in the *Biennio Rosso*, but notes that many of the events were "either directly led or indirectly inspired by anarcho-syndicalists" who had a membership of 800,000. Gwyn A. Williams, *Proletarian Order: Antonio Gramsci, Factory Councils and the Origins of Communism in Italy, 1911-1921* (London: Pluto Press, 1975), p.193. Gramsci also wrote about the occupations in a pamphlet: Antonio Gramsci, *Turin 1920: Factory Councils and General Strike* (Moulihaven Press, 1970).

³⁴ George Woodcock, *Anarchism* (Mitcham: Pelican Books, 1961); p.333.

including at Union Carbide. Italian metalworkers originally occupied their factories in February 1919 in their fight for the 8 hour day, much as the workers at Altona fought for the 35-hour week; however, the atmosphere amongst the industrial proletariat and revolutionary peasantry – following the war, and the Russian and German Revolutions – meant that any militancy, even if initially reformist, would quickly adopt a revolutionary guise. Occupations occurred not just across almost every industry in the north of Italy but also in the rural south: hundreds of peasants occupied estates near Palermo and Potenza, confirming the reciprocal relationship between occupations, industrial, agricultural and public.³⁵

During the *Biennio Rosso*, the Factory Council Movement, as it became known, shared close similarities to the events that would take place in Spain 16 years later, particularly in Catalonia. There, the quest for State power, unlike in Germany and Russia, was deemed less important than workers' possession and control of the economic infrastructure. As mentioned, this is closely aligned with the doctrinal foundations of anarchism and syndicalism (unsurprising, as this was largely the work of the CNT-FAI – the National Confederation of Labour and Iberian Anarchist Federation) which perceives the state as becoming superfluous and superseded by revolutionary control of the means of production – itself a result of labour taking possession of the instruments of the economy through occupation, both industrial and agricultural.³⁶

Factory occupations also emerged, more recently, in another well explored near-social revolution. In May, 1968, riding on an international wave of student occupations related to the Vietnam War, French workers occupied their factories in mass numbers as they responded to a call from their counterparts in the

³⁵ Williams, *Proletarian Order*, pp.251-252.

³⁶ Gustav Landauer, a German anarchist murdered by the Freikorps in 1919 during the German Revolution, provides arguably the most illuminating quote on this theory, when he said "The state is a condition, a certain relationship between human beings, a mode of behaviour; we destroy it by contracting other relationships, by behaving differently toward one another...We are the state and we shall continue to be the state until we have created the institutions that form a real community." Quoted in Peter Marshall, *Demanding the Impossible: A History of Anarchism* (Sydney: Harper Perennial, 2008), p. 411. A discussion around those themes is contained in Michael Schmidt and Lucien Van Der Walt, *Black Flame: The Revolutionary Class Politics of Anarchism and Syndicalism, Vol. 1* (Oakland: AK Press, 2009), pp.194-198.

universities.³⁷ Daniel Cohn-Bendit discusses these in his recollection of the broader events of that month, as does Andree Hoyles' more specifically targeted research into the factory occupations themselves.³⁸ What becomes increasingly evident, however, when considering the literature related to the history of factory occupations is that – despite a significant number of studies devoted to seminal episodes, like the *Biennio Rosso*, or Flint in 1936-1937 – nothing comprehensive exists. Nor is there a wider analysis of what an occupation engenders holistically, or what can be garnered from the various similarities or differences discernable across a wide range of occupations historically.

Overwhelmingly, those who consider factory occupations through a wider lens, as Ness and Azzellini do, approach them from the familiar perspective of a Marxist or anarchist analysis of labour history and class struggle. Yet not even a purely academic study (insofar as such a concept can exist) of factory occupations, including their multiple manifestations and variations, has been conducted, despite the fact that the multitude of writers that have focused on specific periods reiterate key indicators and commonalities. Taking into account the historical lacunae that exists regarding this unique yet largely ignored event – which remains Australia's longest factory occupation – this thesis will provide a significant link in the historiography of factory occupations and Australian labour history. And due to Australia's very limited history in this regard, it will also impart a somewhat different perspective from what has come before.

Historical Background

Labour in Australia, when compared with other industrialised nations, has had a quite successful if spiteful history in its battle for shorter working hours. The Union Carbide Occupation situates this event within the longer and – it should be noted – unfinished narrative for fewer hours in industry. Australia, notably, was

³⁷ These student occupations, and those of the Civil Rights Movement were inspired in part by industrial occupations, thus furthering that mutual exchange between occupations of a public, agricultural and industrial nature.

³⁸ Daniel Cohn Bendit, *Obsolete Communism: The Left Wing Alternative* (London: Andre Deutsche, 1968); Andree Hoyles, *Imagination in Power: The Occupation of Factories in France in 1968* (Nottingham: Spokesman Books, 1973).

first in the world to win the 8-hour Day in 1855 and 1856.³⁹ Stonemasons in the two major cities were the victors in both instances.⁴⁰ Aside from the 8-hour struggle, which – due to its relationship to the annual May Day celebrations – is part of the broader international battle on the part of the proletariat, the other principal skirmishes were those for 44-hours weekly in the 1920s, those for 40-hours in the immediate post-war period, and those for 35-hours – the subject of this study.

A recurring theme when considering fewer hours, regardless of period or place, is the vociferous opposition from employers, politicians and their representatives in the press. According to Cahill, these groups selflessly argued that the introduction of the 8-hour day for workers in the mid-19th century would lead to alcoholism and other forms of vice. The worker therefore required strict discipline and potentially an *extension* of hours for their own welfare.⁴¹ In 1927, Justice Beeby, when granting the 44-hour week, recognised that “improvements of condition of employment and standards of living of working people have rarely been the result of concerted concession by employers.”⁴² Similarly, the judges that passed the momentous 40-hour week on 8 September, 1947, noted:

It has been the historic role of employers to oppose the workers' claims for increased leisure. They have, as is well known, opposed in Parliament and elsewhere every step in this direction, and this case is no exception. The arguments have not much changed in 100 years. Employers have feared such changes as a threat to profits; an added obstacle to production; a limitation on industrial expansion and a threat to internal and international trade relations...And history has invariably proved the forebodings of employers to be unfounded.⁴³

³⁹ Peter Love, “Melbourne Celebrates the 150th Anniversary of its Eight Hour Day,” *Labour History*, No. 91 (Nov., 2006), pp. 193-196.

⁴⁰ Rowan Cahill, “On Winning the 40 Hour Week,” *Illawarra Unity - Journal of the Illawarra Branch of the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History*, 7(1), 2007, pp.16-25.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² “Who Said This?” *Amalgamated Metal Workers Union Monthly Journal*, January, 1975.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

These same arguments were to recur time and again during frequently during the lengthy struggle for 35-hours between 1972-1981 at the Altona Petrochemical Complex.

The Adversary: Union Carbide

Union Carbide and Carbon Corporation became an incorporated institution in 1917, when it merged the Union Carbide Company, founded in 1898, with the National Carbon Company, Linde Air Products Company, and Prest-O-Lite Company.⁴⁴ However, its real emergence as a serious player in the corporate world was when it discovered a financially viable way to create ethylene from natural gas in 1920, thus giving birth to the modern petrochemical industry.⁴⁵ Today, Union Carbide exists under the umbrella of Dow Chemical Corporation. Its legacy is not ambiguous nor benign: despites its successes, financially and technologically, Union Carbide, Dow Chemical Corporation and the wider industry are marred by their ongoing relationship with the US Military, and more covert elements of the US State, and its role in advancing the causes of militarism and various kinds of chemical warfare cannot be understated.⁴⁶ This was also the company under whom the disaster at Bhopal occurred in 1984.⁴⁷

In 1979, Union Carbide was one of seven corporations situated in the Altona Petrochemical Complex in Melbourne's industrial west, alongside B.F Goodrich,

⁴⁴ Union Carbide Website. Union Carbide: History. <http://www.unioncarbide.com/history>

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Not only were links to the US military a significant aspect of Dow Chemical's history, but the industry's wider relationship with the military and state apparatus of oppressive regimes like the Nazis (including some of the other companies in the Altona Petrochemical Complex), casts a pall over the entire industry. See Hill, *Sitting In*, pp.20-29. Furthermore, both Agent Orange and Napalm were inventions of Dow Chemical, and a court case was brought against Dow and Monsanto in 2005 by victims of Agent Orange in Vietnam. Its effects continue to seriously affect victims in Southeast Asia, several generations on.

⁴⁷ Sources that discuss the Bhopal disaster and Union Carbide's complicity include Dan Kurzman, *A Killing Wind: Inside Union Carbide and the Bhopal Catastrophe* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1987); and Larry Everest, *Behind the Poison Cloud: Union Carbide's Bhopal Massacre* (Chicago: Banner Press, 1986).

Hoechst, Dow Chemical, BASF, Australian Synthetic Rubber Company and Australian Petroleum Company. Other notable players located nearby (and discussed briefly in this thesis) were Australian Carbon Black and Monsanto. The complex began in 1961, and at the time was the largest concentration of petrochemical companies in the Southern Hemisphere.⁴⁸ There was an ongoing commercial and mutually beneficial relationship between the seven companies, described as “mutual aid,”⁴⁹ or “interdependence,”⁵⁰ and during industrial disputes this relationship was reinforced by their common antipathy to workers’ struggles. The companies’ interrelationship and collective reciprocity would be influential in forcing the unions to also act cooperatively during the 1979 dispute. Many of the parent companies for those that resided in the complex were some of the biggest corporations in the world, yearly enjoying multi-billion dollar profits, and, by the late 1970s, the Australian sections were making astronomical returns: in the first half of 1977, the industry’s profits increased by 400%, and thereafter a further 57% or 78% in the six months to December 1978, depending on the source.⁵¹

Profits aside, Union Carbide’s approach to workers’ grievances can be understood by its preparatory conduct in times of (relative) industrial peace. The staff has been described as a “professional scabbing force” as all new management were forced to sign a prepared statement outlining their willingness to continue production during stoppages.⁵² The Union Carbide workers continually pointed

⁴⁸ Goya Bennett, “Altona Activist Honoured,” *Maribyrnong Weekly*, 29 March, 2009.

⁴⁹ An interesting description given the notion of “mutual aid” and its relationship to workers’ collective struggles since anarchist theorist Peter Kropotkin’s evolutionary work of the same name. G.I Chambers, “Mutual Aid Organisation in the Altona Petrochemical Complex,” *Engineering Conference 1978: Engineers Developing a Better World; Conference Papers*, 1978, pp. 272-275.

⁵⁰ Peter J. Rimmer, “The Australian Petrochemical Industry,” *Economic Geography* 44 (October, 1968), pp. 350-363

⁵¹ Michael Byrnes, “Union Carbide’s Second Half Surge Puts Profits Up 25pc,” *Australian Financial Review*, 11 January, 1979; The 400% increase, and the second figure regarding the six months to December 1978, can be found at “Company’s Profits Soaring,” *The Amalgamated News: Official Journal of the Amalgamated Metal Workers and Shipwrights’ Union*, October 1979, Vol. 6, Special Edition: 35 Hour Week.

⁵² Dave Deutschmann, “Union Carbide Sit-in,” *Direct Action*, 6 September 1979.

to this issue as a rationale for their occupation, an aspect discussed below. Another factor given significance was that the staff to worker ratio was two to seven: two members of staff for every seven workers – a fact that many workers argued was not accidental nor coincidental, and further indicative of a company more than prepared for regular episodic outbreaks of class warfare.⁵³

The petrochemical companies were represented – during the dispute and regularly throughout the 35-hours campaign – by the Metal Trades Industrial Association (MTIA), an outspoken body whose *raison d'être* was furthering the interests of privilege, property and profit, almost exclusively at the expense of the workers whose employers they represented. The MTIA currently resides within the amalgamated Australian Industry Group, of which it was a founding member, after merging with the Australian Chamber of Manufacturers.

The Protagonist: the union and its membership

Union Carbide and its co-conspirators had very much met their match in the unions involved in the dispute and their leaders. According to the Federal Secretary of the AMWSU, J.P. Garland, as of 1976 the union was involved in an estimated thirty percent of all industrial disputes whilst only covering three percent of the workforce – a fact illustrative of an innate militancy and willingness to struggle.⁵⁴ Despite its low national representing numerically, the union was the largest in the country at the time.⁵⁵ Its leadership, principally made up of Communist Party of Australia (CPA) and Australian Labor Party (ALP) militants from the Socialist Left faction was, according to one study, highly representative

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Presumably this is referring to the year prior to publication, 1976, although this is not made clear by either the interviewer or Garland. Interview with J.P. Garland, Federal Secretary of the AMWSU, in Pat Huntly, *Inside Australia's Top 100 Trade Unions: Are They Wrecking Australia?* (Northbridge: Ian Huntley, 1976), pp.324-325.

⁵⁵ Ross M. Martin, *Trade Unions in Australia* (Ringwood: Penguin, 1981), p.61. Amalgamations between the Boilermakers and Blacksmiths, the Sheet Metal Workers, and the Amalgamated Engineering Union (the latter being the forerunner to the AMWSU) made the AMWU the biggest union as of 1972, and in 1976 it amalgamated again to become the AMWSU, remaining the largest in the country until deposed by SDAEA in 1979 (today's SDA). See Kathryn Cole, *Power, Conflict and Control in Australian Trade Unions* (Ringwood: Pelican Books, 1982), pp.105-107.

of the aspirations of its membership, largely due to a residual commitment to fight and strike for wages and conditions.⁵⁶ Although most of the leadership's time was devoted to these issues, it recognised that developing the political consciousness of their membership was a foremost objective – given its commitment to broader social and political change.⁵⁷ Accordingly, the AMWSU's education program was perceived as innovative and pioneering amongst radical circles.⁵⁸

Towards those aims, the union had constructed a Shop Steward's Charter⁵⁹ and a Job-Delegate's Rights Charter⁶⁰ that demonstrated its dedication to rank-and-file self-management. Philosophically, the AMWSU reflected the communist and socialist leadership's aspirations in seeking "the control of industry in the interests of the community."⁶¹ Significantly, in 1975, the notion of industrial democracy was adopted by the ACTU,⁶² although recognised at the time by President Bob Hawke as something "impossible under capitalism."⁶³ Industrial democracy was acknowledged at the ACTU Congress of 1977 as "a natural

⁵⁶ Ed Davis, "A Profile of Decision-makers in the AMWSU's Victorian Branch," *Journal of Industrial Relations*, June 1978, vol. 20 no. 2, pp.179-190.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ "Leading the Way in Union Education: Account of an Interview with Bob Richardson, AMWSU," *Radical Education Dossier*, Issue 14: Autumn, pp.16-18. The emphasis on workers' education is extensive: multiple examples from elsewhere, including Italy, where the metalworkers had instituted forms of industrial democracy (see note 65) and the UK following the occupations of 1971-75 are discussed in detail. See AMWSU Papers, 1959-1996. Melbourne University Archives, Series No. 2001.0038, Box M2, M11, M14, M15 and M17 [henceforth AMWSU Papers].

⁵⁹ Cole, *Power*, p.249.

⁶⁰ Edward M. Davis, *Democracy in Australian Unions* (North Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1987), p.177.

⁶¹ Ed Davis, "A Profile of Decision-makers," pp.179-190. The AMWSU monthly journal also reflects these imperatives, calling for industry to be brought "under public ownership" and that the periodic crises of capitalism "is the capitalist economic system itself." See Editorial, *Amalgamated Metal Workers Union: Monthly Journal*, January, 1975.

⁶² Carr, "Australian Trade Unionism in 1975." *Journal of Industrial Relations*, Vol. 13, 1979, pp.413-423. Claims for industrial democracy were also adopted in 1977, and championed by the AMWSU who were seeking any worker with information on "worker participation schemes". See J.D Garland, "National Office Report," *Amalgamated Metal Workers and Shipwrights' Union: Monthly Journal*, July 1978.

⁶³ Carr, "Australian Trade Unionism in 1975."

extension of the democratic rights of working people,"⁶⁴ but implementation was, as it has been historically, the unspoken challenge. Locally, the AMWSU championed the example of Melbourne-based Dyavac Pty Ltd., a worker-run and cooperatively controlled enterprise, whose turnover had doubled since self-management.⁶⁵ The AMWSU also looked towards the metalworkers of Italy, with whom they had a relationship, that had implemented self-management in certain circumstances during the 1970s.⁶⁶ The causal link between factory occupations and workers' self-management, with occupation often existing as a pre-requisite for workers' control of the means of production – as discussed in the literature review – situates the Union Carbide Occupation as a potentially pivotal moment in the furtherance of that cause: it may have been able to close the gap between aspiration and reality, or at very least have been useful propaganda in achieving that ideal.

The Union Carbide workers had also pioneered various other progressive changes in the two decades prior to 1979. In the early 1960s, for example, they had won three week's annual leave, and in 1972 they extended that to four weeks before it became standardised throughout the sector.⁶⁷ Despite the militancy of the AMWSU, other unions, like the conservative Australian Workers' Union (AWU), and the Federated Ironworkers of Australia (FIA), which "rarely struck"⁶⁸ and were perceived to have a "conservative influence"⁶⁹ within the industry, were also involved. Alongside the Electrical Trades Union (ETU), which possessed a similar history and reputation to the AMWSU, these four core belligerents rounded out the primary deployment on the workers' front.

However, other unions had minor roles to play: the Federated Engine Drivers and Fireman's Association (FEDFA), and the Association of Architects, Engineers, Surveyors and Draughtsmen of Australia (AAESDA), represented

⁶⁴ "Preamble," *Industrial Democracy*, ACTU Congress, 1977, AMWU Papers.

⁶⁵ George Gaertner, "Everybody is the Boss," *The Age*, 9 June 1977.

⁶⁶ L. Consigli, "The Restructuring of the Factory," *Federation of Italian Metalworkers: Monthly Review*, February 1976.

⁶⁷ Dave Deutschmann, "Showing the Way on 35-Hour Week," *Direct Action*, 4 October 1979.

⁶⁸ Bramble, *Trade Unionism*, p.69.

⁶⁹ Peter Annear, "Metalworkers Demand Action," *Direct Action*, 4 October 1979.

workers both at Union Carbide and elsewhere within the complex. Supporting roles, as we will see, were also played by various other unions, the ACTU, and other organisations that extended their solidarity.

Chapter 2: The 35-Hour Week Movement: 1972 – 1975

For the AMWSU, the 35-hour week was the natural extension of those previous labour struggles for shorter hours, and in that sense it was perceived widely as an inevitability, as ETU member Vic Williams noted during the occupation at Union Carbide.⁷⁰ The nature of the 35-hour Movement, beginning in earnest in 1972, and concluding – to a large degree – in 1981, was conditioned by two broader factors. Firstly, the labour movement was, as stated, confident in aims and militant in action. In many ways, the willingness of the unions to take protracted industrial action, regularly, was symbolic of that former era: it certainly bore little resemblance to today's apparent inertia. Second, internal ALP politics, and its interrelationship with the ACTU, was influential in determining outcomes, particularly as the Whitlam Opposition, after 23 years of federal conservative rule, appeared likely to soon become the Whitlam Government. Consequently, the metalworkers withdrew their demand for the 35-hour week, initially, during the 1972 election campaign,⁷¹ and this issue re-emerged when the ALP looked set to return to office in the 1980s.⁷²

The first Australian workers to achieve a 35-hour week were the miners of Broken Hill – their victory had come in 1920 after a very hostile struggle over safety and other issues beginning in 1919.⁷³ 35-hours was a significant demand also in 1949, when 23,000 miners struck in a national coal strike, broken by the Chifley Government with the use of the military.⁷⁴ More recent to the battles of the 1970s was a resolution adopted by the ACTU at its 1957 Congress to pursue a policy of 35-hours in all industries. It also stated that its aim was to conduct a nation-wide campaign towards that ideal.⁷⁵ In reality the 35-Hours Movement did

⁷⁰ Deutschmann, "Showing the Way on 35-Hour Week."

⁷¹ Bramble, *Trade Unionism*, p.67.

⁷² Carr, "Australian Trade Unionism in 1979."

⁷³ Hill, *Sitting In*, p.91.

⁷⁴ See Phillip Deery, "Chifley, the Army and the 1949 Coal Strike," *Labour History* 68, May 1995, pp. 80-97.

⁷⁵ Jim Hagan, *Australian Trade Unionism in Documents* (Melbourne: Longman Cheshire, 1976), p.179.

not begin until 1972, under the auspices of the AMWSU, with the ACTU only adopting a new amendment a month into the Union Carbide Occupation. This was put forth from the “progressive forces,” after 20 years of “pious resolutions,” according to ACTU Assistant Secretary Bill Richardson.⁷⁶ In the early 1970s, the debate had at least materialised within mainstream political discourse, with Prime Minister Billy McMahon stating “this is not the time for a 35-hour week movement...we are opposed to it at this stage.”⁷⁷ Advocates, of course, pointed to the opposition from conservative forces to almost every kind of progressive change historically.⁷⁸

The Union Carbide Sit-in Strike of 1979 was inextricably linked to a campaign begun in 1972, seven years earlier. On 27 April 1972, a meeting was summoned at the Trades Hall in Melbourne, due to award negotiations breaking down between oil industry representatives and oil workers.⁷⁹ The relationship between the oil and petrochemical industries at Altona was a close one: the oil companies shared infrastructure with many companies in the complex and many of the unions that represented workers in the petrochemical industry also represented oil workers.⁸⁰ Furthermore, the petrochemical industry was wholly

⁷⁶ Dave Deutschmann, “Bill Richardson Speaks on Union Carbide,” *Direct Action*, 27 September 1979.

⁷⁷ Hill, *Sitting In*, p.96.

⁷⁸ See chapter one for discussion.

⁷⁹ Personal Note, Hill Papers, 1 May 1972, Box 6: 35-Hour Week Movement, Neville Hill Papers, 1937-1992, Special Collection, Victoria University [henceforth Hill Papers]. Barry Hill donated his father’s archives to Victoria University documenting his over 30-year involvement with the union movement. Without the archives, the likelihood is that this remarkable episode in Australian labour history would remain untold. This thesis will rely on those archives, and also to a lesser degree on Melbourne University’s AMWU archives. Finally, Hill also cites a booklet about the occupation put together by Dave Deutschmann, a member of the Socialist Worker’s Party (SWP), but this is difficult to locate. However, Deutschmann wrote multiple articles for the SWP’s *Direct Action* throughout the occupation which are utilised.

⁸⁰ Furthermore, the site of the Altona Petrochemical Complex was decided by its location a mere four kilometres from the petroleum refinery – then operated by Stanvac, currently ExxonMobil. J.E Kolm, “The Chemical Industry: Australian Contributions to Chemical Technology,” chapter in Australian Academy of Technological Scientists and Engineering (eds.), *Technology in Australia*,

reliant on oil for its finished products. Unsurprisingly, and in a not dissimilar fashion to the general belligerence that would typify Union Carbide's conduct during the 1979 dispute, the oil companies initially refused to countenance any form of discussion on the notion of a 35-hour week. Moreover, they demanded that the unions sign a prepared document, thus waiving their right to any discussion of shorter hours in any capacity. Should the unions refuse, all claims were off the table.⁸¹

A conference was convened for 1 June with all metal and electrical trades unions – the Storemen and Packers' Union, the FEDFA, the Transport Workers' Union, the AWU, the Miscellaneous Workers' Union, the Clerks Union and ACTU President Bob Hawke in attendance. Laurie Carmichael, AMWSU Assistant Secretary and CPA militant, was set to provide a report-back from an earlier meeting he had with industry representatives.⁸² The stage was set for industrial drama, as Carmichael outlined the oil companies' continued refusal to even contemplate negotiations on a 35-hour week. A unanimous decision was reached by all unions in the immediate aftermath to conduct a nation-wide twenty-four hour stoppage – in the process making history. According to Neville Hill, this was the “first combined stoppage of all unions throughout the industry,” and it would not be the last time that the unions would unite in their struggle for the 35-hour week.⁸³

The oil workers' strike would last nine weeks before the oil companies agreed to confer on claims for a 35-hour week, albeit within nine month's time. However, in accordance with their previous recalcitrance, it required a full three weeks of striking before the companies succumbed to any discussion of 35-hours whatsoever.⁸⁴ This was largely due to a solidarity campaign implemented by the Seaman's Union – the kind made illegal today due to clauses 45d and 45e of the Trade Practices Act, introduced by the Fraser Government as part of their wider

1788-1988: A Condensed History of Australian Technological Innovation and Adaptation During the First 200 Years (Parkville: Australian Science and Technology Heritage Centre, 2000), p.675.

⁸¹ Personal Note, Hill Papers, 1 May 1972.

⁸² Personal Note, Hill Papers, 13 June 1972.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ “History of the 35-Hour Week Struggle,” *The Amalgamated News*, October 1979.

anti-union platform⁸⁵ – with fuel supplies beginning to dwindle as early as two weeks into the dispute, leading to an “emergency situation regarding hospitals and essential services,” particularly in Tasmania.⁸⁶ What makes this all the more sordid is that, although largely predictable, the companies were apparently receiving advice to “stand firm” from the conservative McMahon Government,⁸⁷ and “overseas interests”⁸⁸ were allegedly involved. At one point, the Government was contemplating recalling parliament on the issue – a rare occurrence in the history of Australian politics – and was attempting to use this as a weapon against the increasingly popular ALP.⁸⁹ On this they failed, due to multiple reasons beyond the scope of this study, and a settlement was reached on 21 August.⁹⁰

The 35-hour week became a full reality for oil workers in 1974, despite various actions from the companies and counter-measures from the unions throughout 1973 and early 1974. The result of this was that by 1975, petrochemical workers at Altona were “surrounded by workers who enjoyed the shorter working week.”⁹¹ The nine weeks’ struggle of 1972, nevertheless, had been highly instructive for those fighting for fewer hours. And as 1975 drew closer, another tool in the workers’ belt was the deteriorating economic figures: November 1974 saw the worst unemployment figures in post-war history.⁹² The argument that fewer hours would benefit more workers gained impetus.

⁸⁵ This book contains a discussion of the anti-union legislation introduced by the Fraser Government, something discussed in a later section detailing the Union Carbide response to the 1979 occupation. See James Vassilopoulos et. al., *MUA Here to Stay! The Issues Behind the Make or Break Dispute* (Chippendale, N.S.W: Resistance Books, 1998), p.43.

⁸⁶ Personal Note, Hill Papers, 26 June 1972.

⁸⁷ Blanche d’Alpuget, *Robert J. Hawke* (East Melbourne: Swartz, 1982), p.201.

⁸⁸ Editor’s Notes, “Wage Freeze Promise,” *Amalgamated Metal Unions: Monthly Journal*, December, 1972.

⁸⁹ Parliament had been recalled on only three occasions historically – the abdication of Edward VIII, and the wars against Japan and Korea. d’Alpuget, *Hawke*, p.204.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ The quote is from Neville Hill in “History of the 35-hour Week Struggle.” *Amalgamated News*, October 1979.

⁹² Carr, “Trade Unionism in 1975.”

The 1975 struggle

Of that period in 1975 when the petrochemical workers of Altona instituted and worked a 35-hour week – without the compliance or acceptance of their boardroom overlords – very little information is available. The few records that do exist are sporadic and form only a limited narrative. Much of it consists of incomplete typed notes of organiser Neville Hill, with an accompanying journal of barely legible handwritten comments. Nevertheless, a generalised outline of events is still discernable.

Logically enough, the workers and their unions in the petrochemical industry assumed, given the victory of the 35-hour week in the oil industry and the close relationship between the two industries, that a concomitant “flow on” would occur. In spite of this, the spirit of obstinate defiance which the oil companies had epitomised during their “negotiations” was the only “flow on” the petrochemical workers could rely on, with the companies maintaining a resolute silence on even speculation – never mind any potential negotiation – on the concept of a 35-hour week.

“Frivolous” and “not to be considered now or in the future” was the response the Union Carbide stewards received after lodging a claim for the 35-hour week with management following their return to work on 3 February, 1975.⁹³ Consequently, a decision was adopted to maintain overtime-bans and, rather nonspecifically, “engage in job tactics.”⁹⁴ Whether or not these decisions were effective or somehow intimidatory is unclear; however, not long thereafter, the company subsequently agreed that its “attitude was incorrect” and arranged to keep the “claim under constant review with the stewards.”⁹⁵

Despite the apparently newfound conciliatory approach of Union Carbide, its resistance persisted, as could be expected, and the first record of the workers self-implementing the 35-hour week across the complex was 2 June, 1975.⁹⁶ However, it was probably implemented far earlier – in February or March – since the “seven or eight months,” as the period was labelled by Hill and others, would

⁹³ Personal Note, Hill Papers, 24 February 1975.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ Personal Note, Hill Papers, 2 June 1975.

have only constituted four or five months. Six companies were included in the 35-hour ban, along with Monsanto – who, despite not residing in the complex, were located in relatively close proximity at West Footscray.⁹⁷ The campaign included a ban on overtime, on call-backs, and on the importation of external contractors.⁹⁸ On 9 June, a meeting with Union Carbide management revealed, according to Hill, that the company was “under pressure” but was “not prepared to negotiate in any way.”⁹⁹

Other more impedimentary aspects, however, may have been at play. It appears the campaign may not have been afforded the level of support within and beyond of the AMWSU fraternity: Carr notes that after a “set-back” in April, AMWSU stop-work rallies were few in number and that votes for further industrial action unexpectedly barely passed in many cities.¹⁰⁰ Hill also cites one incident at Hoechst that exemplifies the wider culture of the petrochemical companies in the complex. The incident is also comparable to the description, as we have seen, of Union Carbide as a “professional scabbing force” and contains substantial implications for the occupation.

On 15 September 1975, two stewards belonging to the AAESDA were dismissed, which resulted in the entire plant being brought to a standstill. Apparently, this was the first time the Managing Director had become involved, suggesting this matter was of some importance. The case was brought before Commissioner Neil at the Arbitration Commission, who found that Hoechst’s justification for the sacking was their concern over attempts to unionise their staff.

⁹⁷ Personal Note, Hill Papers, 28 July 1975.

⁹⁸ Personal Note, Hill Papers, 9 June 1975.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ The AMWSU metal worker’s journal refers to a wage claim which was quashed around that period, with stop-work rallies to ensue – this may have been the set-back Carr was referring to, though the journal provides no definitive answer, nor in any of the successive months. See “New Log of Claims,” *Amalgamated Metal Workers’ Union Monthly Journal*, April, 1975. Alternatively, an article from December, 1979, states that the Australian Conciliation and Arbitration Commission did not “grant full indexation since April 1975” and this may be the set-back referred to. See Jim Baird, “The National Wage Case,” *Amalgamated Metal Workers and Shipwrights’ Union Monthly Journal*, December, 1975.

This would affect the staff's critical political role as a "strike breaking crew."¹⁰¹ If the role of staff at Hoechst corresponded closely with those at Union Carbide as a "professional scabbing force" – and we can assume that this was the case throughout the complex – then it is not surprising that none of the companies considered any form of negotiation. As long as staff were able to maintain their role as strike-breakers in continuing production during stoppages there were no grounds to negotiate, accede or forfeit. Unless, that is, the staff could be prevented from assuming that function, which could only transpire if the workplace was occupied.

Interregnum: 1975-79

Appropriately, the period between 1975 and late 1978 was described by Hill as a "war of attrition."¹⁰² In some ways the eight months of struggle in 1975 actually wrought significant returns, regardless of any perceived or actual defeat: Hill notes that the legacy of the 1975 campaign was highly instructive for the unions as they moved towards the occupation:

A great deal of experience, information and lessons came from the campaign. Since that time there has been a consistent attitude by our members in endeavouring to build up a relationship with all unions and membership in the complex to bring about another more broadened campaign.¹⁰³

Aside from the practical lessons, during the "attrition" years, the philosophical imperatives of the AMWSU became increasingly more radical. Seminars on industrial democracy, for example, were held by the South Australia Government, amongst many others, with AMWSU organisers heavily involved.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰¹ Hill's quotations, so presumably the words of Commissioner Neil. Personal Note, Hill Papers, 15 September 1975.

¹⁰² Neville Hill, "Issues to be Discussed," AMWU Papers.

¹⁰³ Personal Note, Hill Papers, 6 November 1978.

¹⁰⁴ Speaking at the conference, industrial democracy, according to organiser Jim Baird, "requires no artificial stimulation – it is inevitable." Jim Baird, "Industrial Democracy Seminar, May 29 to

Throughout 1979, various actions occurred, with three important meetings, in particular, denoting an increased assertiveness on the part of the unions. The first AMWSU Interstate Delegates Meeting occurred on 28 April in Sydney; it accepted the shorter working week as a “top priority” and recognised that the campaign would require “a period of build up.” It also outlined a persuasive rationale for that priority. Firstly, between 1970 and 1978, \$67 billion dollars was invested in the industry internationally, with production exceeding \$250 billion annually; this was then greater than the gross national product of all countries in the world except the five largest economies.¹⁰⁵ Second, the implementation of more advanced technologies which were increasing productive capacities, moreover, multiple expansion programs (including a completely new facility costing half a billion dollars near Geelong, and a \$400 million dollar upgrade at Botany) plus the fact that the industry was one of the few in Australia actually envisaging large-scale increases in employment added weight to the critique of the companies’ position.¹⁰⁶

Nevertheless, a 42-page presentation was issued by the companies outlining why the 35-hour was “impossible and [their] continued attitude thereon.”¹⁰⁷ The workers were not to be dissuaded: a meeting on 18 July, which was the “first occasion since the opening of the petrochemical industry in Altona that all unions and membership have combined and will meet together in support of one claim” was attended by 500 – half those employed at the complex, and above expectation.¹⁰⁸ The 35-hour campaign was unanimously endorsed, and it was resolved that no industrial settlements be considered until such time as the companies discussed 35-hours in each plant. Should that not occur, a further mass meeting would be called to discuss a more militant response.¹⁰⁹

June 2, Hosted by the South Australian Government,” *Amalgamated Metal Workers and Shipwrights’ Union: Monthly Journal*, July, 1978.

¹⁰⁵ Ted Lipscombe, “Chemical Industry: Proposed 35-hr Week Campaign (Report to National Council) [sic],” *Amalgamated Metal Workers and Shipwrights’ Union Monthly Journal*, June, 1979.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ Personal Note, Hill Papers, 3 September 1979.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ Personal Note, Hill Papers, 23 July 1979. That meeting did occur, unsurprisingly, on 23 August, and agreed to the following: an immediate stoppage across each plant until the next evening, a ban

Significantly, the 35-hours Subcommittee was established earlier that year. It was a collective body which contained stewards from every plant and the district organisers, and was vital to the administration and progress of the 35-hour campaign and the correlated Union Carbide Occupation.¹¹⁰ In August, the six companies in the complex responded: they each sent out a circular to their respective employees outlining their sustained rejection of a 35-hour week, despite the abovementioned productive and technological advances.¹¹¹ At no point was the notion of an occupation considered as an offensive weapon in the workers' industrial arsenal. The reasons the occupation commenced, as we shall see in the next chapter, were purely defensive.

on call-outs and overtime, a 24-hour stoppage to take place the following Tuesday, and a further 5-hour stoppage the following day to receive a report-back at the Town Hall. See Personal Note, Hill Papers, 27 August 1979.

¹¹⁰ Hill, *Sitting In*, p.86.

¹¹¹ Personal Note, Hill Papers, 27 August 1979.

Chapter 3: The Occupation

The occupation of Union Carbide began on the afternoon of 27 August 1979.¹¹² It materialised primarily as a response to provocations on behalf of management, which had threatened maintenance workers that staff would assume their positions should they refuse to do so (in accordance with existing bans). As stated, the occupation was the workers' sole recourse given management's willingness to continue production – so other forms of industrial resistance, like a standard picket line, were completely ineffective. By this point, there is no doubt whatsoever that the company recognised that such actions would surely elicit an aggressive response: the workers had previously campaigned on this issue for over four years with little progress. The maintenance workers, therefore, decided to “stay-in” to prevent management from pursuing that function in light of the next morning's hearing.¹¹³

This act was immediately followed by a solidarity action by AWU production workers at Union Carbide who refused to work with management personnel.¹¹⁴ Following this, Bill “Hatchetman”¹¹⁵ Kelly, the “top management representative” sacked all twelve maintenance workers and stood down without pay the production workers. Hill, and the ETU representative, Gary Main, reached Union Carbide to enter into conference on these matters at 8:30 that evening. Reasonably, they only asked that the dismissed workers be reinstated, that they be able to start work the following morning, and that the maintenance not be done by staff. The request was refused.¹¹⁶

This initial defensive action – to prevent management from assuming the role of “scabs” – quickly turned into an opportunity for the workers to assert their dominant position as final arbiter on production. The workers approaching for

¹¹² Personal Note, Hill Papers, 27 August 1979.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁵ Apparently Kelly was specifically brought into the management position at Union Carbide in 1975 to “put down” the campaign for the 35-hour week – hence the appellation. “Union Carbide Action Enters Seventh Week,” *The Amalgamated News*, October, 1979.

¹¹⁶ Personal Note, Hill Papers, 3 September 1979.

the night shift, presumably unaware of the historic ordeal that they had embarked upon, passed through their food, and sleeping arrangements were organised.¹¹⁷ The creation of occupation committees, a reoccurring precept for any workplace occupation, was not yet canvassed as no one had envisaged the potential duration of the siege.

The following day at the hearing, the companies, their representatives in the MTIA, multiple members from the six plants and their unions were all present to witness Union Carbide continue their “provocation” in demanding the lifting of working bans and refusing to reinstate the sacked workers.¹¹⁸ Clearly these demands could not be met by the workers, and Union Carbide must have surely been aware that agreeing to those terms would be tantamount to industrial suicide. This begs the question – did Union Carbide and the other companies perceive an advantage to having this matter dealt with immediately or brought to a conclusion? According to Deutschmann, there was sufficient evidence that demonstrated that Union Carbide had planned for a lengthy dispute in the several weeks leading up to the occupation.¹¹⁹ This may go some way to explaining the ultimatum foisted on the workers that instigated the dispute.

Nevertheless, the workers did respond: following the adjournment of the conference, supplies to Union Carbide of steam and ethylene were cut off by members of the FEDFA and the Storeman and Packer’s Union. Thereafter, production was impossible or at least severely limited. The Altona Working Men’s Club was the scene of another meeting at 10am the following morning, which raised \$627 – the first of what became an extensive fundraising operation – and also issued this statement:

This meeting of Altona Complex Unionists condemns the attitude of the complex management in provocatively attempting to force complex unionists into a general lock-out situation. We particularly condemn the action of Union Carbide management who have dismissed over 31 maintenance workers and laid off the rest of the

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ Deutschmann, “Union Carbide Sit-in.”

workforce. We resolve to continue our struggle for the 35 hour week in the Altona complex – by pledging all possible support to the Union Carbide workers and demand their immediate reinstatement. To support and achieve such demand – we determine the dispute – in the immediate future will be confined to Union Carbide – with all other plants being returned to normal operations as from 11 p.m tonight, Wednesday, 29th August, 1979. We further call for all unionists in those plants returning to normal operation – to pledge strong financial support to the Union Carbide workers, remaining in dispute. In order to continue support for Union Carbide workers and the overall furtherness of our claim for the 35 hour week – we authorise the sub-committee to call a further combined meeting of complex unionists when necessary [sic].¹²⁰

It had been decided that Union Carbide would assume the role of primary combat zone in the ongoing war of attrition.

The Occupation of Union Carbide

52 workers were initially involved in the occupation, although, these numbers fell to 35 due to sickness and personal reasons.¹²¹ The occupation involved many of the same factors that occurred elsewhere when such industrial responses were required. One of the foremost issues was placating concerned or lonely children and spouses, for which the obligation often fell to those outside. As will be discussed, multiple committees to organise the occupation and occupants were created, and a tactical media campaign was also established. Solidarity actions and financial aid were provided from across the union movement and indeed the globe. As stated, these occurrences are a recurring manifestation of the factory occupation generally, and this dynamic enables all occupations – even a defensive one, as was the case in this instance – to transcend previous and established

¹²⁰ Personal Note, Hill Papers, 3 September 1979.

¹²¹ Apparently anyone having marriage difficulties or family problems were discouraged from continuing the occupation. Multiple other reasons were also responsible for the numbers falling. Melbourne Correspondents, "Union Carbide: Deregistration?" *Tribune*, 17 October 1979.

forms of hierarchy and arbitrary organisation to institute genuine forms of workers' self-organisation, and potentially, workers' self-management of production itself. Conversely, on the other side of the fence – both literally and figuratively – were the campaigns of Union Carbide, the other corporations in the complex and the MTIA. These, as will be discussed, suggest a long-calculated approach to disputes of this nature; Union Carbide and the other companies were both forewarned and forearmed.

Factory Committees and Workers' Democracy

Factory committees are an integral element of all factory occupations, and the Union Carbide Sit-in Strike in no sense contested that historical universal. Practically, factory committees – also known as factory or workers' councils, or in their higher federative materialisation, soviets – emerge as a direct consequence of the administrative requirements created by the newfound absence of coercive forms of regulation and organisation. In that sense, these bodies are, almost without exception, directly democratic, and provide the nucleus, particularly in revolutionary situations, of the politico-economic structure of the nascent workers' order. For this reason, ideology is not the sole determinant in the historical agency of factory committees. Despite their philosophical relationship to workers' social movements, their existence is at the same time both practical and theoretical.

At Union Carbide, two main sections of factory committees were created: those administered by the “inside” men – the remaining 35 occupants – and those that were the responsibility of the “outside” men. The “outside” men, recognising that success was reliant on facilitating those inside, established a number of committees to delegate financial responsibilities, gate duties, provisions, including food, comfort and recreation; a committee to administer and account for the needs of the wives and families; and committees for roster crews and media responsibilities.¹²² Alternatively, the “inside” men also organised committees for press spokespeople, food, education, and multiple other requirements.¹²³ The entertainment committee, importantly, was established to

¹²² Personal Note, Hill Papers, 3 September 1979.

¹²³ *Ibid.*

coordinate recreational activities and address one of the most pressing issues: boredom.

To maintain morale, it was necessary to ensure that the strikers remained entertained, given the possible extent of the ordeal, which was obviously unknown. Vic Williams, potentially tongue-in-cheek, claimed he had begun to plant vegetables due to the possible duration of the occupation.¹²⁴ The entertainment committee organised sporting activities, including golf, a tennis-tennis tournament, and cricket; a visiting circus troupe (the Pram Factory Oz); a barbeque on fathers' day, attended by up to two-hundred wives, children and supporters; and, significantly, a film showing on the famous Flint Sit-down Strike of 1936-1937.¹²⁵ Similarly, on Monday 17 September, a meeting was held with 15 or 16 of the wives of the "inside men," who were shown the same documentary on the Flint Occupation.¹²⁶ In that instance, women played a pivotal role, arguably more so than in any other occupation, so the choice of documentary no doubt served wider purposes. Accordingly, a vital role was also played by the wives and partners of those involved at Union Carbide.¹²⁷

Other important contributions included two television sets, including one colour, which were no doubt widely welcomed, particularly during the VFL Finals.¹²⁸ Cards, Badminton and many other activities attempted to fill the difficult but disciplined void left by the "strict" observance of the restriction on alcohol and female company.¹²⁹ This was a compromise, the workers were happy to admit, that was vital to ensure the companies and the media did not exploit any potential transgressions in their bid to paint the occupants as subversive elements or "bludgers" unwilling to work.¹³⁰ On another note, hundreds of books

¹²⁴ Mike McKay, "Union Carbide Lock-in Enters 4TH Week," *Tribune*, 26 September 1979.

¹²⁵ Personal Note, Hill Papers, 3 September 1979; Dave Deutschmann, "Union Carbide Fight," *Direct Action*, 13 September 1979; "Fathers Not Forgotten at Factory," *The Mail*, 12 September 1979.

¹²⁶ Personal Note, Hill Papers, 17 September 1979.

¹²⁷ John Hall, "Union Carbide Occupation," *Rabelais*, Vol. 13, No. 13., p.25.

¹²⁸ Shane Green, "Lock-in Union Stays Put," *The Age* 20 September 1979.

¹²⁹ Kerry O'Shea, "The Men Without Women," *The Sun*, 26 September 1979.

¹³⁰ Alan Attwood, "Barbie Breaks Sit-in Boredom," *The Age*, 2 October 1979.

were donated, with these to go to charity after the dispute,¹³¹ and some workers were reading more than they ever had previously.¹³² Aside from the circus, many other performers donated their time and enthusiasm,¹³³ including Frank Trainor's Jazz Band,¹³⁴ and on October 14, in the seventh week of the occupation, radical folk-rock band *Redgum* performed.¹³⁵ Sunday afternoon concerts were a weekly occurrence, and an opportunity for family and friends to maintain the morale of the occupiers.¹³⁶ Some of the more prominent acts were paid for their contribution collectively by the six unions.¹³⁷ These aspects were critical to ensure that, if required, the occupation could continue until Christmas and beyond.

Solidarity

A substantial fundraising and solidarity operation, under the auspices of the newly established fundraising committee, began early in the occupation. After the initial \$627 accrued following the meeting at the Altona Working Men's Club, it was agreed that all complex unionists would contribute a set weekly figure of \$25 towards the strike fund.¹³⁸ The rationale for this was to ensure that the occupation at Union Carbide was victorious, thereby facilitating an adoption of 35-hours across the complex. The strike fund would pay for those workers and their families that were directly affected by the occupation, including the occupying workers themselves, and those sacked by management. By the seventh week of the occupation, more than 200 workers and families were receiving \$90 a week from the fund.¹³⁹

Both financial and moral solidarity were critical in maintain morale as the occupation initially failed to force concessions from Union Carbide. \$520 and

¹³¹ Bruce Hanna, "Union Carbide:35Hour Week Struggle," *Tribune Magazine*, 3 October 1979.

¹³² "We'll Stay Here Till Xmas if Necessary [sic]," *Amalgamated News*, October 1979.

¹³³ Attwood, "Barbie Breaks Sit-in Boredom."

¹³⁴ Personal Note, Hill Papers, 17 September 1979.

¹³⁵ Melbourne Correspondents, "Union Carbide: Workers Still Solid," *Tribune*, 10 October 1979.

¹³⁶ "We'll Stay Here Till Xmas."

¹³⁷ Neville Hill, *Letter Addressed to John Halfpenny*, 16 July 1980. Hill Papers.

¹³⁸ "Union Carbide Action Enters Seventh Week," *The Amalgamated News*, October 1979.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

\$127 were donated by stewards from the other complex plants at two meetings in the immediate aftermath,¹⁴⁰ and another \$536 was raised on 17 September.¹⁴¹ Significantly, delegates attending the 1979 ACTU Conference pledged their financial support,¹⁴² and almost all workers under the Federal Metal Industry Award refused to work beyond a 35-hour week for the duration of the congress.¹⁴³ The congress subsequently agreed – largely due to the occupation, an indication of its significance – on a policy which stated that the implementation of 35-hours across the metals industry was a foremost priority.¹⁴⁴

Across the union movement support continued to amass. Some of the “outside” men toured factories and spoke at a metal trades conference on 2 and 3 October to build assistance for the campaign.¹⁴⁵ Workers throughout Melbourne contributed financially, including the Williamstown Naval Dockyard and waterfront workers, and the Monsanto and ICI petrochemical plants in Sunshine.¹⁴⁶ The local supermarket fulfilled shopping lists and promised six turkeys should the occupation reach Christmas.¹⁴⁷ The local butcher provided meat, Kraft factory workers provided \$500 and Melbourne wharf workers another \$1300.¹⁴⁸ Both the Williamstown and Footscray branches of the AMWSU extended their moral and financial support,¹⁴⁹ and within weeks, the Sunshine, Camberwell, Coburg and Heidelberg branches, along with the Vehicle Builders Union, did the same.¹⁵⁰ Support was also coming in from across the country – the

¹⁴⁰ Personal Note, Hill Papers, 3 September 1979.

¹⁴¹ Personal Note, Hill Papers, 17 September 1979.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

¹⁴³ J.D Garland, “35-Hour Week Claim Chemical and Metal Industries,” *Amalgamated Metal Workers and Shipwrights’ Union Monthly Journal*, November 1979.

¹⁴⁴ “Wide Support for 35-Hour Week During A.C.T.U. Congress,” *Amalgamated Metal Workers and Shipwrights’ Union Monthly Journal*, November 1979.

¹⁴⁵ Dave Deutschmann, “Strong as Ever After Almost 6 Weeks,” *Direct Action*, 4 October 1979.

¹⁴⁶ Dave Deutschmann, “Union Carbide Sit-in: Prepared to Stay Till Christmas [sic],” *Direct Action*, 6 September 1979.

¹⁴⁷ “It’s Taken a Lot of Organisation,” *Amalgamated News*, October 1979.

¹⁴⁸ “Union Carbide: Lock-in Ends, Struggle Continues,” *Tribune*, 24 October 1979.

¹⁴⁹ Personal Note, Hill Papers, 17 September 1979.

¹⁵⁰ Personal Note, Hill Papers, 24 September 1979.

Latrobe Valley, ALP branches nationally,¹⁵¹ the Seamen's Union, and various branches of the AMWSU made contact and passed motions in support.¹⁵² The AWU assisted with legal representation, and a Queensland plant under their representation sent a telegram informing of their solidarity and a consequent 24-hour stoppage.¹⁵³

The solidarity campaign was not restricted to domestic unions: Union Carbide workers in Sri Lanka extended their solidarity via telegram as they were also involved in a dispute with the company.¹⁵⁴ International support also came from New Zealand,¹⁵⁵ and from the International Metalworkers Federation, which in July that year passed a resolution on shorter hours which was endorsed by 30 countries.¹⁵⁶ By the fourth week of the campaign, \$63,000 had been raised, and by the fifth week, this had increased by another \$8,500.¹⁵⁷ Such remarkable efforts enabled the workers to amass \$100,000 during the dispute, enough – according to some – to continue their fight well into 1980.¹⁵⁸

Media Coverage and Media Campaign

The solidarity campaign was very much reliant on the unions' capacity to publicise their resolve. In that regard, both the unions and the company attempted to mount a campaign of propaganda in the public sphere, particularly given the press "blackout" which prevented general information and newsworthy items emerging about the occupation, after some extensive initial coverage.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵¹ Deutschmann, "Strong as Ever."

¹⁵² Personal Note, Hill Papers, 1 October 1979.

¹⁵³ Personal Note, Hill Papers, 17 September 1979.

¹⁵⁴ Personal Note, Hill Papers, 3 December, 1979.

¹⁵⁵ Deb Shnookal, "Labor Leaders Back Sit-in," *Direct Action*, 27 September 1979.

¹⁵⁶ Personal Note, Hill Papers, July, 1979, transcribed from *Frankfurter Allgemeine*.

¹⁵⁷ "Fund's Needed to Maintain Struggle," *Amalgamated News*, October 1979.

¹⁵⁸ Dave Deutschmann, "Workers Vote to End Sit-in," *Direct Action*, 18 October 1979. The concept of continuing the fight until Christmas was canvassed by the workers – entertainment for Boxing Day was being planned as early as October. See Melbourne Correspondents, "Union Carbide: Workers Still Solid."

¹⁵⁹ This certainly appears the case. The major media published large-scale articles about the dispute once it began, but very little coverage emerged between then until the dispute ended in October. Deutschmann, "Showing the Way on 35-Hour Week."

Nationally, industrial struggles were underway that threatened to create a situation akin to the resistance to Thatcherism's mass privatisation and consequent off-shoring of industry in Britain in the late-1970s. On 5 October, *The Age* reported that the "Unions face a Summer of Discontent" citing the metalworkers' 48 hour stoppage, the emerging Telecom dispute and tram and railway workers' campaigns.¹⁶⁰ Curiously, it made no direct mention of events in Altona, which – by that point – had surpassed the duration of any industrial occupation in Australian history.

A month into the occupation, the unions involved (plus the Building Workers Industrial Union, and the Operative Painters and Decorators Union) ran a large half-page advertisement in the *Altona Star-Advertiser*, discussing "company provocation," safety within the plant, and mounting the persuasive argument that 35-hours would create more jobs. It further cited the petrochemical-industry's reliance on oil and the oil-workers' existing 35-hour week, the massive increases in both productivity and profits (400% since 1961), the foreign-owned and controlled nature of the Altona Petrochemical Complex, and the fact that Union Carbide had flagged further expansions – thereby negating any alleged inability to afford a 35-hour week.¹⁶¹ Predictably, Union Carbide responded with a similar half-page advertisement, entitled "Affecting Altona's Economic Growth." It surprisingly avoided the standard corporate rationale for such disputes: the potential for capital-flight, unemployment, and the need to remain internationally competitive. Instead, the advertisement appealed to personal and parochial sentiments, stating that the economic losses, up until that point, were losses to "the employees...and the local community."¹⁶² Another half-page advertisement, however, did discuss competing with plants in Japan, Taiwan, Europe and North America – none of which, the company argued, had a 35-hour

¹⁶⁰ Michael Doyle, "Unions Face a Summer of Discontent," *The Age*, 6 October 1979.

¹⁶¹ "Live-in Story: Union Carbide." *The Star-Advertiser*, 26 September 1979.

¹⁶² "Union Carbide Australia Ltd: The 35-Hour Week, Affecting Altona's Economic Growth," *The Star-Advertiser*, 26 September 1979.

working week.¹⁶³ Advertising was just one element of Union Carbide's strategic campaign to defeat the occupation.

The Union Carbide Response

As demonstrated repeatedly by its historical conduct, Union Carbide would not be drawn into negotiation – at least not until the latter days of the campaign. Financially, once the occupation began, Union Carbide had to hire six full time guards, a costly endeavour.¹⁶⁴ The overall cost to the company during the 51-day occupation was far more significant: \$50,000 daily in revenue was being lost and the company even threatened to shut the plant; although, the proposed closure was surely a ploy to scare the occupying workers in what was still – despite the large-scale losses – an extremely profitable enterprise.¹⁶⁵ The end figure of lost production over the 51 days was therefore \$2,550,000, a sizeable sum. Union Carbide, however, seemed largely imperious during the occupation by the escalating deficit. This may have had something to do with a longer term plan for recuperating the losses. According to a letter sent to the workers and their families, workers would be held personally liable for “damages or injury, including economic loss” due to the “unlawful” nature of the occupation.¹⁶⁶ This was not the only intimidation from the company. Threatening, “obscene” and hoax telephone calls were also part of the wider harassment campaign the workers and their families were subject to.¹⁶⁷ One worker was told his wife was in hospital, rushing off to find her drinking tea in the family home.¹⁶⁸ In another example, a wife of one of the “inside” men was told her children would be “destroyed” the following day at school.¹⁶⁹

Other companies – not solely those in the complex – had become increasingly concerned that the workers' militancy would spread to other

¹⁶³ “Union Carbide Australia Ltd: The 35-Hour Week, A Reversal to Altona's Economic Growth,” *The Star-Advertiser*, [nd].

¹⁶⁴ Hanna, “Union Carbide: 35-hour Week Struggle.”

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁶ Deutschmann, “Union Carbide Fight.”

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁸ “Union Carbide: Lock-in Ends.”

¹⁶⁹ “Wives and Families Resist Pressures, Abuse, Threats,” *Amalgamated News*, October 1979.

contemporaneous disputes. Historically, employers have been particularly alarmed by such overt challenges to property rights, correctly recognising the potentially revolutionary implications of an industrial occupation.¹⁷⁰ Management in the other petrochemical companies demonstrated their collective apprehension. They each sent out letters to their own employees outlining why 35-hours would not be introduced and that the sit-in would inevitably fail.¹⁷¹ In response, the “inside men” at Union Carbide created leaflets designed for the workers at the other plants,¹⁷² and these emerged weekly throughout the dispute.¹⁷³

What is evident is that Union Carbide was relying on other weapons they had previously applied: namely, the state-sanctioned channels, which they appropriately acknowledged were not impartial bystanders or adjudicators. The decision by the Conciliation and Arbitration Commission to send the Union Carbide dispute to the full bench of the commission during the seventh week of the dispute was overwhelmingly applauded by the company, which clearly believed that the matter would be dealt with favourably.¹⁷⁴ The commission was not the only form of assistance from Canberra: Social Security offices in Altona or nearby were apparently instructed to deny payments to sacked or stood down workers from Union Carbide.¹⁷⁵ Just as concerning for the workers involved in the dispute, the Fraser Government had been busy throughout its term implementing a widespread and punitive legislation campaign against workers and unions through its “infamous” Industrial Relations Bureau.¹⁷⁶

Arbitration and Deregistration Campaign

The International Labour Organisation had studied Australian arbitration legislation in the late 1960s and argued that it was internationally unique.

¹⁷⁰ See quote by Alfred P. Sloane in Chapter 1.

¹⁷¹ Hill, *Sitting In*, p.142-143.

¹⁷² Personal Note, Hill Papers, 24 September 1979.

¹⁷³ *For A 35 Hour Week Complex*, AMWSU Flyers, 10 September 1979 – 1980.

¹⁷⁴ “Light Dawns on Dispute,” *The Mail*, 10 October 1979.

¹⁷⁵ “Govt. Blocks Dole to Sacked Men [sic],” *Amalgamated News*, October 1979.

¹⁷⁶ Dave Deutschmann, “Union Carbide Sit-in: Deregistration Threat,” *Direct Action*, 27 September 1979.

Historically, they further argued, only Nazi Germany was comparable in regard to the application of coercive powers against workers.¹⁷⁷ This was before the Fraser Government's additional legislation of 1977, which provided further authority to have unions, or elements of those unions, no longer recognised by the state. As is sometimes the case with legislation of this kind, the definitions are imprecise and malleable, which conveniently allows for subversive elements to fit within the classification. Section 142a of the act – drafted by Tom Hughes, Liberal Attorney-General – allowed the commission to deregister unions.¹⁷⁸ Section 144, on the other hand, allowed the commission to force unions to deregister certain sections of their membership.¹⁷⁹ In both cases, the criteria employed was a convenient one: if the workers or unions were deemed to conflict with the “public interest.” Finally, the legislation can also force workers to join another union, and have the union change its rules within one month.¹⁸⁰

On the 28th day of the dispute, the AMWSU, FIA, AWU and ETU were all notified that they would face the prospect of deregistration.¹⁸¹ The company, evidently, was “relying – to the full – on the repressive legislation.”¹⁸² It was not specified whether this would apply to the entire union, in each of their respective cases, or merely elements within those. The following day, 23 September, the deregistration legislation was condemned by speakers at the occupation, including ACTU Assistant Secretary Bill Richardson, Labor Shadow Minister Jim Simmonds, and two state members of the Labor Party, Joan Coxsedge and Gordon Stirling.¹⁸³

Two days prior, Commissioner Brown, who was assigned to the dispute, visited the occupation for a hearing. This was the fourth conference Brown had convened onsite, and noted that this was the last “throw” for the unions. He also signified that Union Carbide and the MTIA would likely put all their collective

¹⁷⁷ “Penal Powers Invoked – and Appeal to Full Bench [sic],” *Amalgamated News*, October 1979.

¹⁷⁸ “Union Carbide Workers.” *Tribune*.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁸¹ Personal Note, Hill Papers, 24 September 1979.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*

¹⁸³ Personal Note, Hill Papers, 24 September 1979.

endeavours into pursuing Section 142a.¹⁸⁴ During the hearing, the company continued to insist that in the future only “selective re-employment” would be offered and that no provisions would be included regarding the use of staff.”¹⁸⁵ Admittedly, the company was in a fraught position: it could not be perceived to back down, so it continued with its original line, all the while amassing large losses whilst production ceased.

The prospect of deregistration rightly caused angst within union circles, despite the widespread opposition from within the movement. Furthermore, it was noted that if such actions went forward that a dangerous precedent would be set, as that would be the first time the section had been applied.¹⁸⁶ Whilst wider sections of the movement may have been concerned about the legislation, it only served to deepen the solidarity between the striking workers. Bob Sheldrick, an occupying shop steward, could not understand the campaign, and typified general sentiments, stating “What’s it going to achieve? It’s not going to get me out of the bloody place.”¹⁸⁷ Deregistration, even if enforced, would not defeat the Union Carbide Occupation. The workers would not leave the plant without an agreement regarding the introduction of 35-hours.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁶ Hall, “Union Carbide Occupation.”

¹⁸⁷ Deutschmann, “Union Carbide Sit-in,” *Direct Action*, 27 September 1979.

Conclusion

The company finally acceded to negotiation, and 35 workers walked out victoriously from Union Carbide, to cheers and applause, on 13 October 1979, after 51 days.¹⁸⁸ It was Australia's longest factory occupation,¹⁸⁹ and this remains the case hitherto. Legal proceedings, including the hostile deregistration campaign, were all suspended and Union Carbide – after years of stubborn refusal – finally acceded to refer the claim for 35-hours to the Arbitration Commission.¹⁹⁰ This was not the only achievement garnered from the 51 days sitting-in: all sacked workers were reinstated, a major contention point between the two parties, and it was agreed production would not commence prior to 35-hour negotiations being finalised, a significant achievement.¹⁹¹ Whilst elements within the union argued for a continuation of the occupation,¹⁹² and there was certainly some merit to that notion, it is understandable a compromise was realised, given established aims.

At Union Carbide, the unions never pursued an offensive industrial strategy in the furtherance of broader ideological or practical aims. The defensive objectives of the occupation were limited: to discussions on the introduction of 35-hours at Union Carbide, and the use of staff “scabs” during stoppages. These were both recurring non-negotiables prior to the occupation; each would be addressed within the terms of the settlement solely as a consequence of the victorious occupation. Regarding the latter, what was critical for the workers was their strategic victory in challenging and defeating the company's habitual tactic employed for breaking strikes, and the threat of another occupation undoubtedly carried its own psychological caution in this regard. The workers had identified that in the end, as always, they were the ultimate arbiter on matters of production – not the commission, or the government, or management.

¹⁸⁸ “Union Carbide Men and A Friend,” *The Amalgamated News: Official Journal of the Amalgamated Metal Worker's and Shipwright's Union*, November, 1979.

¹⁸⁹ Deutschmann, “Union Carbide Sit-in.”

¹⁹⁰ “Union Carbide: Lock-in Ends.”

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁹² Dave Deutschmann, “Workers Vote to End Sit-in.”

Although 35-hours would not be implemented in the immediate cessation of hostilities, the company had been forced to withdraw, and that was a feat in itself. Equally, despite the fact that only discussions were agreed to, it was starkly clear to both belligerents and to the broader union movement which party had triumphed in the conflict. The final settlement between Union Carbide and the four unions involved the demand that a work value study be conducted to report on the possibility of shorter working hours within the complex.¹⁹³ Notably, this study would include all complex companies and three other companies in the area that had already implemented 35-hours.¹⁹⁴ In that sense, the strategic approach of the occupation, by confining the dispute to Union Carbide, and having other complex workers contribute financially, was a striking achievement: every plant would be included in the viability study, thereby ensuring that – should the study be favourable – 35-hours would be implemented complex-wide. Most of the concern from those workers advocating maintaining the occupation pertained to a possible unsuccessful response from the commission following the study.¹⁹⁵

Judge Coldham was assigned to pursue the work value study,¹⁹⁶ and a working party was created in December 1980 to consider ways of “offsetting” the estimated million dollars per year to implement a 35-hour week.¹⁹⁷ This was found to be attainable – unsurprising given conventional profit margins – and 35-hours was adopted in 1981.¹⁹⁸ The social aspects of the occupation were also manifest. Between one and two hundred more jobs in the area would be created due to the introduction of 35-hours at Union Carbide alone.¹⁹⁹ As the workers had continually asserted, the occupation’s rationale was not solely based on working

¹⁹³ “Sit-in Ends with a Splash,” *The Age*, 17 October 1979. For reasons of space, the negotiations surrounding the 35-hour claim are beyond the scope of this thesis.

¹⁹⁴ These were Australian Carbon Black, Petroleum Refineries of Australia and Altona Petrochemical Company. Deutschmann, “Workers Vote to End Sit-in.”

¹⁹⁵ Dave Deutschmann, “Debate on Tactics: Should the Sit-in Have Continued?” *Direct Action*, 25 October 1979.

¹⁹⁶ *For a 35 Hour Week Complex*, AMWSU Flyer, Hill Papers, 12 December, 1979.

¹⁹⁷ Union Carbide Management, 35 Hour Week Final Implementation Agreement, 24 July, 1981, AMWU Papers.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁹ “Union Carbide: Lock-in Ends.”

hours or conditions pertaining solely to Union Carbide; unemployment in the area and beyond was also a significant factor.

Successes aside, the Union Carbide Sit-in Strike of 1979 did not realise its full historic potential. The higher ideals of workers' self-management, and the factory occupation's causal relationship with that endeavour, were not pursued by the unions. Despite the favourable, perhaps unique, circumstance and despite the rhetoric from AMWSU and ACTU leaders who rightly recognised self-management as the industrial endgame, a work-in at Union Carbide was not even hypothesised. It is debateable to what extent the workers could have maintained such an audacious initiative, particularly in the face of a powerful corporate opposition that would undoubtedly have influenced state and federal repression had the potentialities become overly radical. Nonetheless, this is *always* the case. The workers of the *Biennio Rosso* or the Spanish Revolution did not know the future – they could only imagine the possible opposition or ramifications they might encounter. And self-management is only bold and intrepid because of the prevailing ideological discourse of the day; this can only be challenged and supplanted by instituting working examples of self-managed cooperatives that transcend established industrial and social mores.

Implementation of self-management is arguably the most perplexing predicament of the workers' movement. The cooperative model has historically struggled to exist parallel to the market system, with its ruthless crusade to submit labour to the rigid confines of productivity perceived solely in terms of time and value. The only potential conditions, although momentary and often fleeting, whereby the outdated workplace milieu of coercion and arbitrary regulation can finally be transcended and reconstituted are limited to manifestations of revolt and revolution. The latter places the onus of implementing self-management on broader social upheaval, and this undoubtedly remains the solitary means for the necessary society-wide execution of the socialist ideal. However, revolt – even if occurring amidst minor pockets of resistance to capitalist imperatives – can offer similar possibilities. When federated and organised in conjunction, like the cooperative movement currently occurring in Argentina, these can provide the embryonic cells – even within a capitalist market orientation – of alternative forms of economic organisation.

The beauty of that theoretical and practical ideal is its historic recognition of the social aspirations of the human condition. A genuinely grassroots, democratic, egalitarian and libertarian order can only be attained through industrial and agricultural institutions reflecting those ambitions in their social, economic and political organisation. Self-management, therefore, remains the only authentic emancipatory ideal, and the factory occupation is consequently the midwife of that transformation, much as the working class remains the midwife of history. Historically, self-management has never been an integral element of the Australian workers' movement. Sections within that movement – the various communist parties, radical unions, the IWW, the One Big Union Movement, and others – have regularly delineated that aspiration but very few examples of implementation, or actions to bring about implementation, have transpired. The momentum leading up to and during the Union Carbide Occupation were all present: workers' control conferences attended by AMWSU delegates, ACTU resolutions, and a multitude of foreign examples exhibiting and validating self-management, all extolling the virtues of the cooperative model in the workplace. The Union Carbide sit-in was a historic moment when these ideas could have been attempted, even if briefly. It thus provides the inspiration, and contains the model, for another workplace or for another generation in the future.

Since 1979, a tidal wave of neoliberal corporate reaction has prevailed. It has remained the hegemonic discourse both domestically and internationally, and self-management seems less likely to emerge or establish itself than any time since the First World War. Nevertheless, these pivotal industrial disputes, so often omitted and suppressed by those whose interests they threaten, must be captured and recounted to reinvigorate the public imagination. Social movements are ephemeral, but resistance to oppression is a historical constant. Occupation is one of its highest forms, for it is a challenge of the propertyless and powerless to the authority of propertied and powerful.

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