HOME FRONT WW2: MYTHS AND REALITIES
by Rowan Cahill

In October 2013, the right-wing journal Quadrant published the book Australia’s Secret War, an account by conservative intellectual Hal Colebatch of homefront industrial disruptions by Australian trade unions during World War 2. Described as a secret history rescued from “folk memory”, one previously suppressed by leftists, it detailed ‘treacherous’ industrial actions by unionists that variously denied or delayed vital war materials to the frontlines between 1939 and 1945, resulting in the deaths of service personnel.

These actions, the argument went, pointed to a deliberate and coordinated attempt at sabotaging the war effort by the communist leaderships of the unions involved. Maritime unions, in particular the Waterside Workers’ Federation (WWF), were the focus of the book.

Some context here…during the mid-1930s and onwards, members of the Communist Party of Australia (CPA) came to power within many national and local trade unions organisations, particularly in the leaderships of unions in strategic industries......mining, shipping, stevedoring. Party membership peaked in 1944 with some 23,000 members. According to historian Robin Gollan, by 1945 “communists held controlling positions in unions with a membership of 275,000 and influence in unions with a membership of 480,000 or 40 per cent of all unionists”.

+++++++++++ In the Colebatch account, and especially amongst his supporters, what we are dealing with is a contemporary version of Cold War ideological ‘analysis’, with sinister hidden agendas imputed wherever they can be, and the language blurred so that ‘communist’ becomes ‘Left’…and ‘Left’ becomes so inclusive it embraces anything to the left of whatever the right-wing position is that is being argued from. Even small ‘l’ liberals become caught up in the net, along with much of the ALP.

+++++++++++ Aided by the vituperations of shock jock Alan Jones on the airwaves and Miranda Devine in the Murdoch press, the Colebatch book quickly transformed from a niche publication to a reprint with mainstream national release and distribution for the 2013 Christmas market.
Quadrant editor and publisher Keith Windschuttle effusively praised the book in the December (2013) issue of Quadrant. Arch conservative and devout monarchist David Flint followed in the January 2014 issue with a lengthy review in which the words “evil”, treachery”, “crimes”, “traitors”, “insidious” were used to describe wartime waterfront industrial disputes.

Flint even expressed his wish that martial law had been instituted on Australian wartime waterfronts to combat wharfie industrial actions, and regarded the alleged American use of submachine-gunfire and stun grenades on the Adelaide waterfront in 1942, during an incident allegedly involving the mishandling of an American military cargo by Australian wharfies, as reasonable.

Subsequent reviews and online comment, much of the latter couched in the language of violence and hatred, used the Colebatch account to argue that the actions of the wartime unionists were ‘treasonous’ and the culprits were never brought to account. The attitude of the unionists, it was argued, were such that they considered themselves above and beyond the common good, a sense of moral superiority that still characterises their modern union counterparts, the latter either the trade union movement generally—or specifically maritime workers now organised in the Maritime Union of Australia. According to this argument, present day unionists and their unions should be held accountable for the sins of the past.

The strident anti-unionism of the Colebatch account, and the anti-union hatred manifest in much of the subsequent comment, neatly dovetailed with the Abbott government’s anti-union agenda.

The book came with a ‘back story’. It had been in the process of research and writing at least before 2007 when it got mentioned in conservative attacks on the ABC for screening the mini-series account of the 1998 MUA-Patrick’s waterfront dispute, Bastard Boys. Colebatch’s then unfinished account of wartime ‘sabotage’ and trade union ‘perfidy’ was touted as the story ‘the leftist infiltrated/oriented ABC would never tell’.

Much earlier, Daily Telegraph columnist Michael Duffy (6 January 1999) accused Australian wharfies of “corrupt” and “sometimes traitorous” conduct during WW2.

For conservative commentator Peter Coleman (Spectator, 14 December 2013), Australia’s Secret War was Colebatch’s “tribute to his father”, Sir Harry (Hal) Gibson Pateshall Colebatch (1872-1953), the short-term
(one-month) 12th Premier of West Australia who accompanied strike breakers onto the waterfront during the bitter Fremantle wharf crisis of 1919, an inflammatory action which contributed to the death of trade union loyalist Tom Edwards following a police batoning.

For conservatives of the Rightist kind, not only was, and is, the Colebatch account the story the Left was and is afraid to, and dared not, tell, but in a grim and nasty sense also a case of ‘unfinished business’.

Politically, you can see where this could, and can, go…..

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Colebatch makes significant use of interviews and correspondence with participants or those at a remove from the action being examined. It is the sort of material which Windschuttle has persistently claimed in relation to Australian indigenous histories, is notoriously suspect regarding authenticity and problems associated with misremembering and the anecdotal. Specialist scrutiny by ‘war history’ enthusiasts has raised serious questions about some of Colebatch’s sources, evidence, and facts.

Despite Colebatch’s claim to the contrary, industrial disputes and unrest in Australian wartime industries and work sites have been researched and analysed by scholars of industrial relations and labour history, as has the existence of the many strikes and industrial actions on Australian waterfronts during the war.

In particular, what Colebatch and his supporters seem unable to accept, is what the scholarly literature clearly establishes: that wartime industrial actions by waterfront workers were primarily local in origin, variously based on local factors and understandings, and occurred despite attempts by the communist national leadership of the WWF to curtail them.

Colebatch fails to grasp the realities of what was a complex context and industry: a national trade union leadership, relatively new (the communist Jim Healy had become General Secretary in 1937), in wartime, based in Sydney, overseeing a large national membership organised in some 50 or so port-based branches dotted around a huge coastline, each with their own leaderships, distinct histories, cultures, politics, practices, port characteristics, infrastructures, and work demands.

Further, that the WWF rank and file, far from being communists during the war and the following Cold War, tended to be ALP members or
sympathisers, the interesting point being they supported communist
leaderships through to the 1960s because these were seen to deliver the
goods so far as industrial relations were concerned.

The Colebatch account has maritime workers in its sites as a collective,
and while making mention of the Seamen’s Union of Australia, possibly
the most communist of Australia’s wartime unions in terms of leadership
and rank and file membership, focuses on the wharfies.

This enables the wartime contribution of SUA members to be ignored.
Between 1939 and 1945, Australian merchant mariners suffered losses of
at least 386 dead as the result of wartime service, a significant proportion
of this toll in Australian waters due to enemy mines, and submarine and
air attacks. During 1942 and 1943 in particular, Australian merchant
shipping was specifically hunted and targeted in Australian waters by
Japanese aircraft and submarines.

Overall, hardly a treacherous or inconsequential civilian contribution to
the war effort.

Indeed, as the McGirr Inquiry into the repatriation needs of the wartime
Australian merchant marine pointed out in 1989, better late than never,
during WW2, Australian merchant mariners faced the possibilities of
death and injury from air attacks, submarines attacks, mines, whenever
they ventured out of port, without respite, and were in many ways more
vulnerable and at risk than were members of the armed forces.

Australian merchant vessels were mainly coal-fired, had small crews, did
not carry professional medical teams, and left smoke and spark trails
easily detected by hostiles, unlike the mainly oil-fired naval vessels.

Further, merchant ships were not specifically designed for battle, were
not protected by the weaponry carried by naval vessels, did not have
armoured plating, nor the speed of naval shipping, nor the special
watertight bulkheads designed for combat, and nor was the merchant
marine a workforce specifically trained for combat.

German raiders mined the eastern and southern waters of Australia in
1940, and Japan the northern waters in 1942. The existence of the
German mines was only discovered when merchant shipping
unknowingly sailed into them and became casualties. Mines were a
constant danger, even post-war in places, due to the inadequate mine-
sweeping capability of the Australian navy, the paucity of intelligence data, and the vastness of the Australian coastline.

The first merchant marine casualty due to mining in Australian waters was the British cargo ship Cambridge off Wilson’s Promontory in November 1940, sinking with the loss of one life. The first Australian merchant marine casualty was the coastal trader Nimbin, en route for Sydney carrying a cargo of plywood and pigs, sinking off Norah Head, on the Central coast of NSW, in December 1940, with the loss of seven lives. According to the Royal Australian Navy’s official historian, when the Nimbin went down, naval authorities explained it as the result of an internal explosion, the activities of the German raiders unknown to them at the time. It was only when a naval vessel went to the scene of the fatality, and found itself in a minefield, that the premise for such reasoning was proven false.

In terms of being recognised and included as significant wartime contributors and participants, it was not until the mid-1970s that the Australian merchant marine was included in Anzac Day marches, and not until 1990 that a Merchant Navy Memorial was set up at the Australian War Memorial in Canberra. The 22 volume Official History of Australia during WW2, has one page on the Australian merchant marine.

+++++++++++ Colebatch and his supporters work on the premise of a patriotic, all-pull-together, seamless Australian homefront war effort between 1939 and 1945, in which industrial unrest was a perverse and isolated presence. Indeed, according to David Flint in a lengthy Quadrant review of the Colebatch book (January 2014), Australia was unique in this regard, the industrial troubles and conflict that were part of the Australian homefront in WW2, not paralleled in either wartime Britain or the wartime United States. On this he is manifestly wrong.

+++++++++++ So what did go on regarding industrial conflict?

In wartime Britain, industrial relations was characterised by the ongoing class conflict of peacetime. According to social historian Harold L Smith, this was so intense that in
some war factories….management and workers appeared to view each other as a greater enemy than the Germans.

Despite strikes being ruled illegal after July 1940 in Britain, the number of industrial disputes and working days lost increased on a yearly basis from 1940 through to 1944. According to Smith, the idea that wartime Britain was characterised by “social unity and consensus” is an exaggeration, developed over time by propagandists, myth makers, and historians.

In the wartime United States, unions, generally, supported the war effort; but wildcat strikes proliferated. There were 3000 labour strikes in 1942. The following year, the number of man-days lost trebled to 13.5 million. The number of strikes rose in 1944, but less workers actually went out. By mid-August 1945, the total number of man-days lost that year to date was 9.6 million. Due to the nature of the statistical criteria adopted by US authorities, these figures are probably understated.

So what was the situation in Australia? Before continuing, let me emphasise that none of the following is secret, or hidden; it is all in the public domain, thoroughly discussed, and thoroughly documented in historical and industrial relations’ literature.

During World War 2, industrial disturbances increased in Australia to the point of reaching an extent greater that at any time since 1929. Some 2,210,000 man-days were lost during the period 1942-1945, disturbances increasing as the military situation improved. The most worrying losses were in the coal mining industry, a huge problem for a nation and society reliant on coal for power, locomotion, and merchant shipping.

So what was the cause? Treason? Sabotage by militants? Working class bastardry?

Well, no, and for some explanation we only have to go as far as that well known ‘radical’ historian Sir Paul Hasluck, and his official account of the wartime Australian homefront, written and completed just before he became Governor-General of Australia in 1969.

So far as strikes on the wartime homefront are concerned, Hasluck explained:

The strikes occurred in all parts of Australia and among many groups of workers. Most of them were local disputes over local
grievances and were quickly settled. A number of them were by workers in disregard and in some cases in defiance of their union executives. The only industry in which striking was continuous and extensive was coal-mining in New South Wales.

As Hasluck made clear

in spite of the exceptional efforts made by the (Curtin Labor) Government and the….full support of the moderate union leaders and the exhortations to greater production from the Left Wing, industrial stoppages still occurred.

One of the initiatives of the Curtin Labor government when it came to power in October 1941 was to work and consult closely with the trade union movement, not only via the ACTU, but also via the leaderships of the militant, communist led unions, particularly those in strategic industries. Government and the unions attempted to work collaboratively with regard to wages and conditions. Trade union leaderships actively sought to hold down wage demands, industrial conflict, and encourage increased wartime productivity. The reward for this was the promise of better conditions, if not a better world, post-war. Indeed, increased post-war industrial turbulence is in part attributable to unions seeking to redress postponed and/or lost conditions.

A personal aside here. When I was working as an historian with the Seamen’s Union of Australia in 1970-1972, I met and talked a great deal with the then leader E. V. Elliott, who had also been the wartime leader of the union from January 1941 onwards, a dyed-in-the-wool and leading member of the Communist Party of Australia, a tough and hard man in many ways. However, when he recalled WW2, and his role as union leader and his membership of the wartime Maritime Industry Commission, a Curtin government initiative designed to facilitate the smooth wartime running of the maritime industry, and his often personal role in ensuring the manning of ships, he came close to tears, saying:

I sent men to their deaths; they were in the war zone as soon as they left an Australian port; Cahill (the way he always addressed me, said with a bit of a stutter, which was a long standing speech problem he tried, mainly successfully, to keep under control) the battlefront was just outside the Sydney Heads.
According to Hasluck, increased industrial disturbances and lost working days cannot be simply explained, causation found in a complexity of ‘real life’ factors, including the increased numbers of workers in the wartime workforce, amongst these the extensive employment of women, particularly in industries where men were not available to meet the production demands of war.

In terms of days lost, generally, absenteeism was a particular problem, and this, according to Hasluck, was not necessarily motivated by mischief or spite but by real exigencies….genuinely due to illness, injury, considerable transport difficulties to and from work, and families simply and genuinely trying to survive, juggling the day-to-day demands of work, shifts, the difficulties of shopping in the context of time constraints and rationing, and child care needs.

So far as industrial disturbance in the coal industry was concerned, that too had real causal problems, with coalfields’ trade union memberships on the NSW fields in particular, consistently rejecting or resisting both Communist and ALP leadership directives and pleas to co-operate with the war effort.

On the NSW coalfields, what journalist/historian Edgar Ross termed the pre-war ‘fight it out’ approach to industrial relations by both managements and workers tended to prevail. Amongst miners there was a deep and abiding bitterness towards both employers and the state for police violence and bloodshed during the Rothbury struggle in 1929 in the Hunter region of NSW. In that struggle police opened fire with their revolvers on protesting locked-out miners, wounding some 45 or so and killing 29 year old miner Norman Brown.

Working in a traditionally dirty, dangerous, deadly industry, miners struggled to meet increased wartime production demands, their efforts hampered by the technological backwardness of the mines and their industry. Accidents increased; there were cases of employer violations of Award conditions; examples too of mine managements harassing miners, taking advantage of the miner’s own union’s constant urging of members to produce. From 1942 onwards, coal output declined, with stoppages a contributing factor.

Post-war, pent up hostilities burst free as a tired and strained mining workforce determined to win back and/or secure conditions that had either been lost or postponed.
By focusing on the waterfront, the Colebatch study encourages a gendered image of industrial unrest during WW2. The unpatriotic, ‘treasonous’ worker is the threatening male ‘thug’ on the waterfront. However, Commonwealth Government statistics regarding wartime industrial unrest did not differentiate between males and females in the auditing process, and arguably females added significantly to the mix. During the war, women were encouraged to enter the workforce, many in jobs traditionally the preserve of men, this being the only way the male dominated armed forces could be formed up, and the only way wartime production demands could be met. A detailed study by Gail Reekie (1985) of females employed in wartime West Australia (WA) in the clothing and textile industries, in the munitions and engineering industries, and in nursing, demonstrates the ways their employments fostered industrial militancy. The presence of women in the WA civilian workforce increased by 18 per cent between 1939-1943; female trade union membership increased from 37 per cent in 1940 to 48 per cent in 1945. The number of industrial disputes in WA increased tenfold between 1941 and 1944, the peak years of industrial discontent coinciding with the peak period of female employment generally, and especially in the industries of greatest female employment.

According to Reekie, the need for women in war work, and their employment in jobs traditionally regarded as ‘men’s work’, and the setting of the wage rate at between 60-90 per cent of the male rate, variously empowered women. Organisationally, they found themselves together numerically and in a collective way they had not been previously, while the shortage of labour meant that their employment was secure for the duration, hence boosting their confidence and bargaining power. All of this flowed on to their senses of dignity, worth, and agency, and was manifested in a robust approach to industrial relations, especially in situations where employer attitudes, despite the war, did not cease to regard them as inferiors and ‘less’ than men. Their militancy, argued Reekie, represented resistance to both capitalist hegemony and to the dominant ideology of submissive womanhood.

The right-wing attack on unionism of the type that informs the Colebatch study, seeks to depict the homefront Australian trade union movement,
especially its militant sector, as one thing, essentially ‘un-Australian’, and the Australian armed forces as another, there being little or no commonalities.

However, consider this: 43 per cent of Australian employees were trade union members in 1934, this rising to 52 per cent in 1942, the year in which mass unemployment of the inter-war period ended via wartime manpower planning. Factor in with these statistics the essentially maleist nature of trade union membership and of the workforce during the period, the wartime need for males in the Armed Forces, which required large numbers of women to replace them, and it stands to reason that a significant part of the Australian armed forces comprised former trade unionists. Add to this an estimated 6000 members of the Australian Communist Party, who enlisted as the result of the encouragement of the party, especially after 1941, and huge links become apparent.

It becomes reasonable, therefore, to argue that in ‘defending and protecting the Australian way of life’ so treasured by war propagandists, part of what many in the Australian armed forces were fighting for were factors like the right to work, decent wages and conditions, the right to organise, and for some, the right to be militant and radical.

Equally, on the homefront, it was the obligation of trade unionists, both in leadership roles and in rank-and-files, to protect conditions and build their unions, however this was understood (and it is apparent this was often interpreted differently at leadership and rank-and-file levels respectively), and for union leaderships to ensure that when peace came, their unions would be strategically and politically positioned to work for improved conditions, even for a new world order.

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In conclusion then, simply this: to assign the tumult of Australian wartime industrial relations to the leadership of the trade union movement, to a communist plot of some kind, to portray the turmoil as some sort of sinister plot, to use words like ‘treason’, ‘sabotage’, to even claim that the scale of industrial turmoil in Australia was somehow unique amongst the Allied homefronts, flies in the face of fact and reason, and a significant body of published research and analysis.

It is on a par with the denial of climate change science, and is at once both stupid and malicious.

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