

THE
SCAB
TRAIN

and other essays
on the
Victorian Coal Miners
Association

by
P. D. Gardner

The Scab Train
and other essays on
the Victorian Coal Miners Association

by

P.D. Gardner

by the author:

Gippsland Massacres

Through Foreign Eyes

Our Founding Murdering Father

Names on the Omeo Highway

Names around the Gippsland Lakes

Names of the Victorian Alps

Names of East Gippsland

Names of South Gippsland

Names of the Latrobe Valley and West Gippsland

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P.D.G.

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Introduction - A brief history of the VCMA

In 1893 the Coal Creek Miners Association was formed to counter discrimination against certain miners by the management. Hitherto the workers had been poorly organised with only a few being members of the Amalgamated Miners Association. There evolved from this a militant and highly decentralised union, the Victorian Coal Miners Association, (VCMA) which progressively won a number of major concessions over the years for the miners. This was countered in 1902 when a concerted effort was begun by the two major producers Outtrim, Howitt and British Consolidated (OH & B) and the Jumbunna Coal Co., to crush the union. This battle was fought firstly in the courts with the Martell and Gregory cases and then from January 1903 with the great strike or lock-out. By May 1904 the strike was off and in August, the VCMA disbanded. There followed a non union period from 1904 to 1907 after which the VCMA successfully reconstituted under the Federal award. This was challenged by the companies in the High Courts in what became known as the Jumbunna Case. In 1913 the VCMA merged with Tasmanian miners to form the Australian Coal Miners Association and in 1915 became part of the Australian Coal and Shale Employees Association.

Chapter One

The Great South Gippsland Coal Strike 1903-1904

On 7 January 1903, the management of the Outtrim, Howitt and British Consolidated Coal Mining Company (OH&B) issued their employees with notices of substantial reduction in wages and contract coal hewing rates. Ten days later the men at the two mines, who constituted the bulk of the members of the Victorian Coal Miners' Association (VCMA), overwhelmingly refused to accept the reduction notice given by the management. Thus began one of the longest and most bitterly fought strikes in Australian history. More than 70 weeks later, in May 1904, the remaining strikers voted three to one to call the strike off, and in August of the same year the VCMA disbanded in order to give those unionists still remaining in the coal towns of Outtrim, Jumbunna and Coal Creek, Korumburra, some chance of regaining employment.

Only a brief examination of the years leading up to the strike is necessary to understand that the strike was the culmination of a classic 'labour versus capital' struggle. Coal mining was a dangerous occupation and the regularity of accidents, often fatal, in the South Gippsland mines proved this area was no exception. The VCMA developed into a well organized and fairly militant union and by 1902 most of the miners and other workers in the Jumbunna, Outtrim and Coal Creek mines were union men. In this year the VCMA became involved in two lengthy and quite costly legal proceedings over union issues. The first was the Martell case where a former gold miner sued the VCMA for £1,000 damages for loss of employment. Martell was reputedly a strike breaker and thus the men refused to work with him. Accordingly he was dismissed and then with the backing of the Victorian Employers' Federation began proceedings against the union. This question of union membership was central to the continuing struggle between capital and labour. In the second case the Outtrim mine began proceedings against George Gregory and 17 other members of the union for breach of contract over the failure to give the required 14 days notice for a stoppage. The Martell and Gregory cases were fought concurrently with the 'great strike' and ended up costing the VCMA nearly £2,000. This antagonism between miners and management, which had been evident for several years and which saw substantial strikes in all three mines in the previous three years, set the scene for one side to seek a final solution.

The few historians who have mentioned the strike have generally accepted the cause probably initially put forward by the management and propagated by an extremely conservative press - that the falling price of coal had forced the companies to take measures of economy. A study of available statistics has failed to indicate any clear fall in the price of coal at this time. Furthermore, the returns the companies received for their coal was complicated by special Government contracts for the railways, and railway subsidies, as well as the coal sold on the free market. An analysis of available records for the Jumbunna Coal Co. shows that returns went from 16/- to 18/- a ton from 1902 to 1903 (1). During the strike returns initially went to 27/- before dropping below the 1902 level of 16/- in 1903-1904. The Coal Creek Proprietary Coal Mining Company, the smallest of the three mines, which was paying a higher hewing rate than the others, did not attempt to reduce wages and hewing rates until May 1903. It was at that time that the Coal Creek miners joined the other strikers. These meagre statistics, rather than supporting the contention that falling coal prices caused the strike, seem to indicate that prices only began to fall substantially while the strike was in progress. This fall became apparent after the introduction of strike-breaking labour enabled the return to production of the mines and a more normal return for the product, although the coal supply was still much reduced in comparison with former years. After the strike was over, Arthur Wilson, secretary of the VCMA claimed:

In fact they had not signed the Government coal contracts at that time [Jan.1903] and it was alleged that (the) coal companies meant to use the miners' position as a lever to force the government's hand to give coal companies better prices. (2)

Rather than the falling coal prices being the cause of the strike, it appears the real cause was a concerted and well organised plan by the power brokers in the two main companies to crush the miners' union. This was in many ways just an intensification of the struggle that had preceded the strike. From the initial cause of the strike, that of the drastic and unacceptable reduction in wages and hewing rates, through to its conclusion and demise of the VCMA, the companies' position did not waver, and their stand appears provocative rather than conciliatory. Examples of this include their refusal to accept any form of arbitration, and their calculated and well-organised introduction of strike-breaking labour. The main cause of the strike thus seems to have been the determination of the Outtrim and Jumbunna Coal Companies to crush the VCMA. In this, in the short and medium term, they were singularly successful.