



Inspecting diggers' licences; a contemporary drawing.

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**1854**  
**The**  
**Eureka Stockade**  
**1954**

by  
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## THIS BEST TRADITION

Just before dawn on Sunday, 3rd December, 1854, the diggers' stockade on the Eureka lead at the Ballarat goldfield, was stormed by redcoats and police, and fell. The defeat, though cruel in the deaths of thirty martyrs turned into a striking victory for the diggers and for Australian democracy.

Eureka Stockade was the high point of widespread class struggles on the Australian goldfields in that epic decade, 1850-60, which trebled Australia's population. It was the detonator of a massive class struggle that put Melbourne in turmoil in the week following the Stockade and rolled on for years afterwards as an intense radical fight for the Chartist freedoms, for the independence of the Australian states from imperialist interference, for the "unlocking" of the lands stolen by the squatters, and for the extensive organisation of the labor movement.

Because Eureka gave an Australian "local habitation and a name" to the world-wide struggle for freedom, conservatives have long striven to belittle its significance. Some, like the Sydney Morning Herald, have conducted against it a century-long campaign of direct, unequivocal slander. Others, of the "liberal" school of academics, have damaged it with pious condescension or gutted it with their unspeakable "justifications."

If some of the mud has stuck, the Eureka Centenary is a good time to shake it off, for the past 100 years abound with evidence of the impact, wide and deep, of Eureka Stockade upon Australian history and Australian thinking . . .

Though the Stockade fell, the people of Victoria immediately proclaimed that the diggers were more sinned against than sinning. Two great meetings in Melbourne censured not the rebels but the mis-government of Victoria; two panels of jurymen refused to convict the prisoners whom Governor Hotham stubbornly charged with treason, and a Commission of Enquiry sympathetically detailed the diggers' grievances and urged sweeping concessions which the determination of the people forced into legislative reality.

**While the men of 'Fifty-four lived, they could never forget Eureka.** Its story went with them when they journeyed from Victoria to new mining places — to Queensland, New Zealand, Western Australia, and Broken Hill. And as the itinerant diggers mingled with other workers, they yarned proudly of Eureka Stockade so that it became lodged in the

*"Peter Lalor, our Commander-in-chief, was on the stump, holding with his left hand the muzzle of his rifle, whose butt-end rested on his foot. A gesture of his right hand, signified what he meant when he said, 'It is my duty now to swear you in, and to take with you the oath to be faithful to the Southern Cross . . . . .'"*

*"Some five hundred armed diggers advanced in real sober earnestness, the captains of each division making the military salute to Lalor, who now knelt down, the head uncovered, and with the right hand pointing to the standard exclaimed in a firm measured tone:—*

*'WE SWEAR BY THE SOUTHERN CROSS TO STAND TRULY BY EACH OTHER, AND FIGHT TO DEFEND OUR RIGHTS AND LIBERTIES.'*"

—Eyewitness Caboni Raffaello, "The Eureka Stockade," 1855

heart of the Australian working class. The Stockade was not forgotten in the first Australian May Day March, in Melbourne, 1893; and it has been a feature of May Days ever since.

Craft unionism in the towns arose swiftly and easily in the 'Fifties, and many ex-diggers assisted its rise and its struggle for the Eight Hour Day; but the typical direct "heirs of Eureka" were not craft unionists but versatile semi-skilled workers who moved around the mines, shearing sheds, farms and building jobs, often alternating between the town and the bush. Among these workers, in the Eureka country — the extraordinary mining and pastoral area that takes in Ballarat, Creswick, Clunes and Bendigo — mass industrial trade unionism was born. Beginning among the miners in 1874 (Amalgamated Miners' Association), it spread rapidly. The Miners' leader, W. G. Spence, a life-long enthusiast for Eureka, answered the call of Creswick miner-shearers and undertook the unionisation of the pastoral workers in the 'Eighties. The Shearer's Union was founded in Ballarat in 1886 and pastoral workers quickly became organised in several states. In the great strikes of the 'Nineties, it was the shearers of Barcaldine, Queensland, who hoisted above their police-beleagured camp the republican Southern Cross flag of Eureka Stockade. Thus a definite historical sequence brought the Australian Workers' Union, which grew out of the Shearers' Union, back to Ballarat for its Golden Jubilee in 1936, whence the delegates unanimously visited the Eureka shrines to pay homage to the pioneers.

Out of the 'Nineties strikes came the Australian Labor Party, for the workers learnt in defeat that trade union organisation alone was not enough. Eureka Stockade was frequently on the lips of the pioneers who built the A.L.P., and especially of William Lane, the "father of the political labor movement" (as Mary Gilmore calls him), who strove to inspire Labor with a socialist ideal. Since then, the A.L.P., through many spokesmen, has claimed Eureka as its own. No higher tributes have been paid to the Stockade's fruits for Australian democracy than those of Forgan Smith, Chifley and Dr. Evatt. For several years in the 1930's the A.L.P. organised anniversary pilgrimages to the Stockade site and held political schools at Ballarat. One A.L.P. Branch is on record as urging that Canberra should more fittingly be named "Eureka" (North Melbourne Branch, 1913).

The history books have seldom attempted to reveal the Stockade's full significance. Indeed, none of the academic historians has produced a really deep study of the

Stockade. These people have conceded the existence of a worthwhile democratic "legend," but have lacked either the faith or the knowledge necessary to lead them to the reality of the Stockade's importance in Australian history. Consequently, latter-day historical writings on Eureka have not been as valuable as those of contemporaries like Thomas McCombie (1858) and W. B. Withers (1870).

**It is not in the academic writings, but in the people's literature and art that Eureka has received some of its deserved recognition.** From 1854 to 1931, when John L. Potter the last Stockade veteran died declaring that, "Though the diggers were defeated in battle, their cause was won," the newspapers and magazines are studded with letters, reminiscences and opinions by Stockaders or their contemporaries. The volume of such comment has ebbed and flowed with the intensity of popular political feeling. It was especially rich around 1890, the period of the greatest popular upsurge since the Golden Fifties, and is recorded by papers like the Bulletin (Sydney), the Tocsin (Melbourne) and the Boomerang (Brisbane). Later radical and working class papers have continued in this tradition — the Labor Call, Victorian Socialist, Ross's Monthly, Militant, Communist, Worker, Guardian, and Tribune, to name but a few. The Stockade was given a prominent place in great Nineteenth century novels of Marcus Clark and Rolfe Boldrewood. It was applauded in the verse of Henry Lawson, Victory Daley, Randolph Bedford, Francis Adams and Mary Gilmore. Eureka plays have been written by E. W. O'Sullivan, Louis Esson, Lesie Haylen and Richard Lane. There is a report of a 1906 silent film as well as the post-war Harry Watt production. And Eureka has formed the theme of one of the old Cycloramas, various novels, radio features, paintings, pieces of journalism, and many others. The southward march of Japanese Fascism in the Second World War caused writers to stress the best traditions of Australian independence and democracy, and the six years 1942-47 saw no fewer than six major Eureka publications and innumerable lesser references.

It is understandable, then, that Australian cultural workers should be preparing this year to greet the Eureka Centenary in prose and verse and song and dance, a proud upsurge of our own culture, which, in the Eureka tradition, will give battle to alien forces at work in our country — to the demoralising comic strip, the degraded film, the surrender of our oil and uranium, the aping of McCarthyism.

Eureka Stockade is Australia's own and best tradition of struggle for independence, democracy, and economic welfare. Truly national in form — "offensively Australian," to

use Furphy's phrase — it has nevertheless been warmly greeted by democrats of other lands. It is not the monopoly of the Left-Wing; it has become part of the "folk knowledge" of our people, and Ballarat anniversaries of this most militant event have been addressed year after year by churchmen and members of parliament.

2.

## THE NATURE OF THE CLASS STRUGGLE ON THE GOLDFIELDS

Though the Australian goldrushes began in 1851, gold had been discovered several times before that date. The news had always been suppressed for fear that convicts might break loose and workers leave their jobs.

Transportation of convicts to the Australian mainland ended in 1840, but large numbers of convicts remained for long after this, working out their time. Everywhere, wool was king and the mean squatter wanted no gold fever disturbing his pastoral domain.

All was changed, however, by the goldrushes to California in 1849 — the most important development in gold production for a century. The squatters saw a considerable part of their labor force rush to the Californian diggings; so when Hargraves "discovered" gold once more, the news was widely advertised, instead of being concealed, in the hope that it would bring a rush of workers to Australia.

During 1851, spectacular rushes took place to many fields in New South Wales and Victoria. From town and sheep run the workers sped, expressing with their feet their opinion of wage labor.

The squatter found himself with fewer hands than before. Desperate to save his endangered economy, he resorted to employing those aborigines who had managed to survive his earlier shooting and poisoning parties, and their readiness skilfully to adapt themselves to station labor amazed him, as did their willingness to settle down if given better conditions than they were accustomed to. He made a virtue of necessity by selling his unshorn sheep as mutton at inflated prices to the diggers. He devised station methods which economised labor by eliminating European-style shepherding. And having power in the colonial legislatures, he settled down to harassing and taxing the diggers into returning to station employment . . . Monopoly of land, and privilege in government, meant that the squatter, though put to some bother, could not really lose.

Before any rush of goldseekers from Europe or America could take place, the Australian goldfields were peopled by the existing Australian population compounded of ex-convicts, freeborn and free immigrants. So far away were the people of Europe in those sailing-ship days that the "Australians" had undisputed possession of the goldfields for nearly twelve months before the masses of European diggers began to change significantly the numerical composition of the diggings. In December, 1851, these Australians won the first major struggle on the diggings when they successfully opposed the attempt by Governor La Trobe to double the 30/- monthly gold licence.

It is necessary to stress this prior Australian occupation of the goldfields because a myth is abroad that the period 1788-1850 is a sort of colorful but inconsequential pre-history, while the "real" history of Australia begins with the goldrushes. Snobbish people attempt thus to hurry past the convict beginnings of Australia.

Unquestionably, the great gold decade, 1851-61, was a qualitative leap in Australian development. Population trebled (400,000 to 1,100,000), commerce and banking increased vastly, the introduction of self-government was hastened, and so on. **But while recognising the accelerating role of the gold period and its intrusion of new qualities into Australian society, the elements of continuity from the earlier (convict) period must not be overlooked.** The material basis of this continuity was the fact that capitalism, primarily pastoral and commercial, and with it the early Australian working class, had supplanted convict (slave) labor as the principal form of production even before 1840.

In 1851, the existing Australian population set the tone on the goldfields before the immigrant diggers could arrive. A distinctive Australian character was already in evidence. Thus Harris in 1849 could write: "The Australians, we must here remark, are growing up a race by themselves; fellowship of country has already begun to distinguish them and bind them together in a very remarkable manner."

Out of the convict's hatred of oppression, overseers, masters and police; out of the emancipated convict's struggle for social standing and equal rights, had grown the loathing for class distinction and the firm foundations of the characteristic Australian democratic impulse: "Give him a fair go!" Revolted by the prospect of wage servitude, the Australian worker saw farming land, at present monopolised by the squatters, as the path to independence, whence he could indulge his wonderful capacities for pioneering and roughing-it as a jack-of-all-trades. The gold discoveries

of Chartism. The Sydney stonemasons first won the Eight Hour Day at this time, 1856, but this grand advance was much more deeply consolidated from 1856 onward in Victoria on a broad front of the building trades.

6.

## CONCESSIONS, ILLUSIONS — AND "UNFINISHED BUSINESS"

Considerable as were the gains from Eureka Stockade and from the class battles it unleashed, the Australian people faced a long period of continued struggle for the full realisation of the Eureka programme of national independence, democratic rights and economic well-being.

The very gains bred illusions that democracy had replaced tyranny, that progress would continue until the finest type of society was reached. The people, lacking a political party to generalise their experience, had very imperfectly learned the lesson of the Stockade: that it is necessary to expose and isolate the enemy, and to maintain unity against his tyranny.

Only for a brief moment in 1854 had the interests of British imperialism and the squatters been clearly exposed to the people as grasping, tyrannical and foreign. Sir Charles Hotham and astute squatter politicians like William Foster Stawell (a W. C. Wentworth of Victoria!) understood in their alarm, that never again should class domination be allowed to become so nakedly obvious. To these people, the "gains" of Eureka were "concessions" resentfully granted to appease mass wrath, but only that minimum conceded which would secure pacification while the prevalent ruling class ideology reasserted itself, confusing the people, dividing the united goldfields movement, and bringing the majority back to the path of "respectability" and constitutionalism.

The hated police were withdrawn from the daily administration of the goldfields, but remained the same police as before, a weapon of the ruling class which would be used again against the people's movement.

The odious monthly licence was abolished and ostensibly replaced by a fair gold export duty, but in fact Hotham more than compensated for lost funds by introducing a system of indirect taxation, largely at the expense of the diggers just released from paying the direct licence tax.

It was, however, mainly by the concession of parliamentary rights that the ruling class bred illusions that true democracy had arrived.

Less than ten years after Eureka, Victoria had won the essential features of parliamentarism. The people were assured that it was now only necessary to "choose the right man" and progress was assured. Negatively, the diggers mistrusted this rosy view, for the majority of them did not take out the £1 Miners' Right which carried the allegedly all-important right-to-vote (1855-59). But negative mistrust was not enough, for the "leave it to parliament" attitude had a damaging effect upon the mass movement as was shown in the case of the Land Convention. Arising in 1857, this "People's Parliament" had succeeded in postponing land legislation until the first parliament elected under universal manhood suffrage should take office at the end of 1859. As soon as the enlarged Parliament was elected, the Land Convention went into decline; the people were deluded into abandoning a most useful instrument of struggle that could have served, as Parliament did not, to check the later errors and abuses of the land laws.

Behind the parliamentary appearances of democracy lay the reality of class rule. In the first eight years of responsible self-government, 1856-63, eight ministries came and went; rival sections of the ruling class were scuffling to win the leading positions. These sections were a compound of the interests of British imperialism, the squatters, the big farmers and land-owners, the merchants, manufacturers and bankers — capitalist interests, despite the preponderance of working class and lower middle class voters. The concern of such parliaments was to create conditions favourable to the flourishing of capitalist business, and only reluctantly, when mass pressure arose, to make concessions to the lower class electors. And back of Parliament, in case the illusions it engendered should fail to quiet the popular demands there remained the police, the military, the laws safeguarding the right of the capitalist to exploit, the conservative judges, the gaols . . .

Thirty years of relative prosperity followed Eureka and helped to clinch the illusion that parliamentarism had brought the only possible democracy. Wages were good compared with Europe's; the expanding pastoral-mining economy assured uninterrupted employment; and the opportunity of becoming independent of wage labor was not completely remote while there were still the chances of striking it rich on the goldfields or selecting a small farm under the land legislation. But in the 'Eighties the illusions began to tarnish.

The 60's and 70's had been prosperous by the lean standards of other lands and had satisfied the Australian workers for a time. By the 'Eighties this standard was fixed as a cus-

tomary minimum and the workers, wanting improvements, saw that they were marking time while the capitalists multiplied their resources. Unionism had not spread beyond the select craft stage; the masses of workers had not received the 8-hour day. The gold was now too deep save for the capitalist owners of machinery, and the best land was legally tied up. In these circumstances, the working class as a whole became aware of its own separate interests and the conditions for its new class consciousness were reliance on its own strength, faith in Australia's future, and detachment from the illusions of the first decades of liberal parliamentarism.

By 1885 the Australian working class had to some extent matured, becoming an integrated, stable class. An Australian national sentiment had emerged to clash with the ties of Empire. Republicanism which had subsided after Eureka was revived especially to attack the continued British hold on Australian foreign affairs and defence. Then, beginning with the 1886 launching of the Shearer's Union, the unionisation of the unskilled and semi-skilled spread with dramatic speed. Amidst this rising turbulence of the 'Eighties and interwoven with the strands of the new unionism and republicanism and Australian nationalism, arose a new force — socialism. Though of an idealistic kind, and lacking as yet a practical programme, it clearly presented, as the diggers of 1854 were unable to do, the alternative to capitalist parliamentarism: a Commonwealth of working people without private capitalist exploitation.

The employers, alarmed at the re-awakening of militancy and especially desiring to smash the new unions, stepped from behind the screen of parliamentary freedoms to wage a naked brutal fight with the unionists, using not only parliamentary powers but also the weapons they kept in reserve — police, military, press, legalism and economic coercion. In the great strike struggles of the early 'Nineties, the capitalist ruling class defeated the workers, exposed them to the ensuing blast of depression, inflicted sad economic hardship, but failed in the central purpose of smashing the unions.

In these significant class battles, the workers re-asserted the issues of the Eureka struggle: firstly, for national independence, because the self-government granted in 1855 had proved to be limited by the ties with the Empire, the powers of the governors, and the willing subservience of top sections of privileged capitalists to the British market, and, hence, to British politics; secondly, for democratic rights, because of legal checks on unionism, legal protection of employers' interests, and the use of the armed

state against the workers; and, thirdly, for economic welfare, because the employers wanted to hold back the economic advances the new unions were beginning to make and clearly wanted to retrench on the eve of economic depression, at the workers' expense.

Just as the defeat at Eureka did not prevent the winning of considerable gains, so the defeat of the workers in the Nineties was followed by an advance. "The first great step of importance for every country newly entering the movement," wrote Engels, "is always the organisation of the workers as an independent political party, no matter how, so long as it is a distinct workers' party." In this sense, the foundation of the Australian Labor Party was a qualitative advance for the working class. On the other hand, just as the gains from Eureka had bred illusions, so did the Labor Party breed illusions among the people.

The illusion that parliamentarism itself would bring democracy was replaced by the illusion that a political party called "Labor" would achieve this. To the A.L.P., the workers bequeathed their historic demands which had been so clearly expressed at Eureka. The leading militants also urged the new party to adopt socialism as a further, culminating demand. In refusing to do this, the Labor Party committed itself to carrying on in the inadequate liberal tradition of the post-Eureka years.

A growing consciousness of the insufficiency of the Eureka demands was forcefully shown by the life experience of the 22-year-old Stockade pikeman, Montague Miller. Though wounded and nearly killed by the soldiers, he lived to take part in all subsequent struggles of the working class for nearly seventy years. He fought for the 8-hour day and its universal extension, for militant action of the craft unions and the extension of unionism to the unskilled, for the system of free, compulsory, secular education for the workers, and the dissemination among them of the latest scientific and rationalist knowledge; he swiftly imbibed the new socialist ideas and helped as a leading trade unionist and socialist propagandist to build the Labor Party. Finding, as time went by, that the A.L.P. leadership was resistant to socialism, Monty Miller and other socialists warned that a time of crisis would come when the new party would betray the workers. The precedent was there, in liberal Peter Lalor's betrayal of the voters who sent him into parliament, his renunciation of democracy.

The illusion that the A.L.P. had brought a real change was increased by the early, partial successes it achieved in the spheres of national independence, democratic rights and economic welfare. The Australian Commonwealth replaced

the separate states, national defence measures were devised, the trade unions were enjoying considerable freedom of action, and a mass of legislation on land, customs, working conditions, and particularly the system of arbitration, was standardising and seemed likely to improve the conditions of the people.

But the socialist prophets never ceased to criticise the A.L.P. Withdrawing from the Party into various socialist sects, they pointed out how the Party leaders, in the welter of arbitrationism that marked the first years of the Commonwealth, were forgetting even the lip-service they had hitherto paid to socialism. They drew attention to the mounting instances of sell-outs of striking workers by the politicians who were cornering for themselves lucrative parliamentary careers; and they showed how others were taking the path pioneered by Lalor, abandoning the workers after briefly espousing their cause, and becoming capitalists and conservatives.

To Monty Miller and other principled socialists, it seemed the climax of betrayal when the A.L.P. leadership in 1914 abandoned the traditional working class opposition to wars between rival capitalist systems. The future of the world, it seemed to Miller, could only be in the struggle against exploitation and war, for the ideal of a classless society. He knew that there were sincere progressives in the ranks of the A.L.P., and in the militant unions and the various contending socialist sects; and in 1920, the last year of his life, he expressed agreement when he heard the programme of the newly-formed Communist Party of Australia. It grieved him in his last days that there were differences between Australian progressives.

Were he alive to-day, there can be little doubt that Miller would be active still in the ranks of Australian socialists whom he regarded as the continuers of the unfinished struggle of Eureka, and active today as he was so often in the case of peace. He frequently spoke of the lessons he learnt at Eureka — how the diggers' successes were due to their exposure of ruling class tyranny and to the unity of the people in fighting it.

Today, more than ever, there is need for Australian progressives to cooperate in pushing forward the historic demands of the people. Britain no longer stifles our nationhood, but we cannot consider ourselves independent while a flood of American money is subordinating large areas of our economy, bringing with it political strings that tie us to United States' foreign policy so erratic and belligerent in its treatment of our Asian neighbours. The democratic rights that earlier Australians battled to achieve are threatened by hysteria trumped up through spy scares, and by telephone tapping and the growing power of secret Security Police. Our living standards are continually under attack and popular actions to defend them are headed off by interminable legalism and fines on unions. There is much "unfinished business" of Eureka Stockade, and it would be a heresy against good Australianism to take for granted the freedoms which come to us from past fighters in the Eureka tradition.