

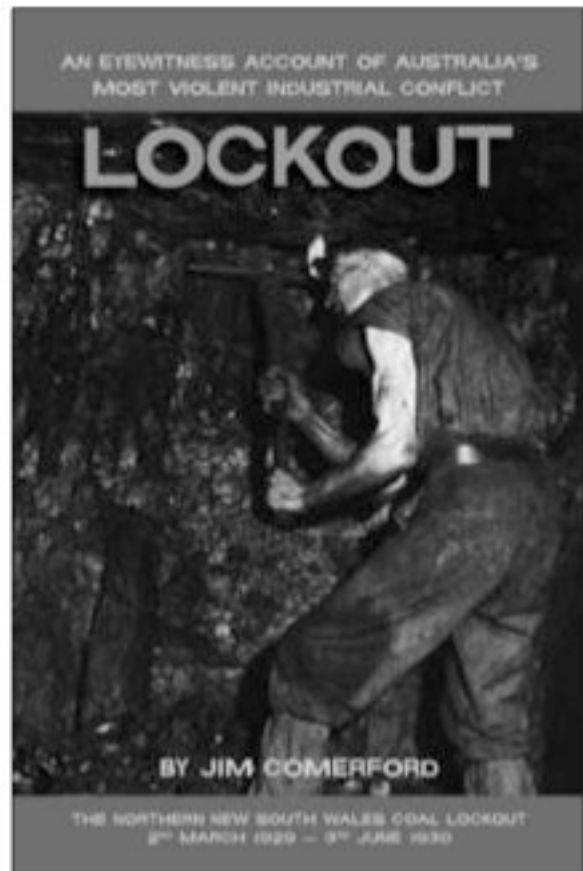
LOCKOUT

Tony Maher
General President
CFMEU Mining & Energy
Division
12 April 2006

Launch of the book “Lockout” by
Jim Comerford.

Speech to Northern District
delegates and retired
mineworkers
Cessnock, NSW

(For publication details and an
order form please see the end
of this document.)



Nothing reveals the huge imbalance in power between capital and labour as sharply as a lockout.

Nothing demonstrates the immorality of the owners of capital more clearly than a preparedness to starve families, to bash and shoot workers, in the name of greater profits.

Nothing could do more justice to the social consequences – the pain, the suffering, the misery – than Jim Comerford’s book “Lockout”.

As an historical event the lockout of ten thousand men and boys in the collieries operated by the Northern Collieries Association for fifteen months is an extremely significant event. Yet it is only when one reads through the book that we begin to understand just how significant it was and how turbulent were the times.

Reading this book in 2006 is an opportunity to look back 76 years to a very different world. The differences are striking. The industry was overwhelmingly a domestic industry. They had interstate competition for domestic markets. The industry was crucial to domestic services such as railways, electricity, gas, cement etc. The industry was owned by Family businesses and shipping companies. That seems so very different to what we face today. But is it?

Does it matter what markets accept the product? Does it matter what type of company owns the business? I think the current generation will see the remarkable similarities between the actions of the Northern Collieries Association proprietors when faced with falling prices in 1929 and those of the modern, global mining giants when they were faced with falling prices in 1998. In fact, over the last 76 years the reaction of capital has always been to put itself first irrespective of the consequences to those who produce the vast wealth they enjoy.

Jim Comerford's attention to detail on the structural and economic forces shaping the industry at the time is unsurpassed. Of course it reflects the deep understanding of political economy favoured by progressive unionists and socialists of the time.

Jim's book is a fascinating insight into the political forces that have shaped this nation since federation. In 1929 the Australian Labor Party was less than 30 years old. The Miners Federation had a large group of members of parliament at state and federal level. Some served with great distinction, some were a bitter disappointment. Perhaps not much has changed.

Perhaps unintentionally Jim's book gives us an insight into the working class origins of the ALP and language of the times. The Labor Party's Ben Chifley, a future Prime Minister who was to turn his back on the miners in 1949, in 1930 spoke of "the cold blooded murder of our comrades by the police of the Bavin government" at Rothbury and that "this latest action has completely torn the mask of impartiality from the face of democracy and revealed to the working class the necessity of class organisation to meet further onslaught of the master class." 76 years later you don't hear that language from too many members of parliament. More's the pity.

1929-30 coincided with the beginnings of the rise of the Communist Party of Australia that, in later years, had a significant role within the leadership of our great union. One of the most remarkable things about Jim's book is his objective assessment of those individuals involved in this historical event despite the diversity of political beliefs – the still not fully developed Labor party, the fledgling Communist party, the Socialist Labor Party, the Militant Minority Movement and the One Big Union. For a participant/observer who himself went on to play a major role as a leader of the federation and an active communist to write with objectivity and compassion is absolutely extraordinary. I doubt there are many of us who could write about contemporary disputes without falling victim to the temptations of subjectivity and intolerance.

As far as the other side of politics is concerned, not much has changed. The Bruce - Page Federal Government and the New South Wales Bavin Government were true supporters of their class. Unfortunately it seems a consistent theme of Australian politics that the conservative political parties have a better record in delivering for their constituents than does the Labor Party. What is shocking to the reader is the undisguised brutality meted out to ordinary workers and their families by the Bavin government in particular in order to secure greater profits for their corporate mates. The direction by the Government to revoke food relief from illegally locked out miners and their families on the most spurious grounds demonstrated the brutality of a class war. That is indeed what it was. It was a war where the victims included women and children, the sick and the elderly. On top of that hundreds of outside police were given the mandate through the Unlawful Assemblies Act to systematically round up and bash any locked out miner, occasionally the wives and routinely the union activists.

Of course the crowning glory of the Bavin Governments intervention in the illegal attempt to drive down workers wages was the outrageously expensive farce of opening the Rothbury colliery with useless scab labour. As everyone connected with the mining industry or with trade unionism would know Rothbury was the scene of the police murder of an innocent miner named Norman Brown during a planned ambush of protesting miners which was orchestrated by the repugnant 'Rajah of Rothbury', Mines Minister Reginald Weaver. Despite the emotional pain it caused the writer, this episode is

revealed with all the detail you would find in a film production. The Rothbury scab mine was an expensive failure but the story does not end there and the book goes on to detail the journey towards a bitter settlement.

Throughout the book Jim Comerford's eye witness accounts of the internal workings of the Miners Federation are fascinating. His description of events is straight forward and without embellishment. Yet his analysis of the motivations of the various national district and lodge leaders is objective and non-judgemental. It would be easy to cast the "Laborist" national Federation leaders as timid and compromising. Jim is at pains to detail their strength and wisdom as well as the differences of opinion and the lost opportunities. Equally important, Jim focuses on the extraordinary capacity and respect felt for leaders with different political perspectives like Bondy Hoare, the President of the Northern District and powerful lodge officials such as Bill McBlane are described as the real opinion makers of the time. Some things never change.

Above all else the Northern District Lockout of 1929-30 is testimony to the great democratic structure of the Federation and its ability to withstand the owners' attempt to crush it as well as the many attempts by outside forces to control it. If there is one single most important lesson of these tragic events for today's generation of unionists it must be to never let go of the democratic structure inherited by us that has proven time and again to be our saving grace.

For those interested in the social conditions of the time there are many parts of Jim's book that bring a wry smile at one moment and would bring a tear to a glass eye the next. The current generation of miners and unionists more broadly must read this book in order to truly understand the hardships endured by working people for the benefit of future generations of working people. Before we talk about the hardships endured by those before us and the need to defend standards in today's comfortable and affluent society, read this book! Please don't say those things without truly understanding the extent of those hardships. Perhaps if we all read this book then we will really understand what we have inherited and what we must defend.

Lessons for contemporary Australia

When reading this book it was tempting to draw parallels between the 1929 lockout and some of the disputes we've endured in the last ten years. Having completed the book I now know that there is no comparison. Simply because of the scale of the lockout, the savagery of the repression and the harshness of the conditions endured.

That's not to say that there are no similarities worth mentioning. The extraordinary generosity of unionists and miners in particular in levying themselves to support those facing disputes we can proudly say continues to this day. We can also say that this generation of unionists understands the need to at times step sideways and occasionally backwards in order to maintain the continued existence of this great organisation. We had to face that in all of our disputes like Hunter Valley, Mt Thorley, Vickery, Blair Athol, Gordonstone and the rest. Having led the union through most of those disputes I know that today's rank and file remain attached to the Federations structure and democratic processes and that they remain an essential part of the satisfactory outcome to any dispute.

Politically the similarities, differences and lessons are extraordinary. The Bruce / Bavin governments unashamedly backed an illegal lockout of ten thousand workers to secure a reduction in wages and conditions. In 2006 the heir of those political forces, John Howard, has made legal everything perpetrated on the ten thousand locked out miners. The similarity between Howard's industrial relations changes and the stance of the Bruce and Bavin governments is extraordinary. Howard's laws allow thousands of mini lockouts and threatened lockouts to bloom through the guise of the unfettered right to sack workers and the employers right to replace them with those willing to work for less.

When the Bruce Government took its ham-fisted support for the lockout as far as threatening the abolition of all federal awards and the Conciliation and Arbitration Court itself, it was flogged at the next federal election. The lesson there appears to be that the Australian people will not tolerate the wholesale removal of workers rights and living standards. On the Labor side of politics a bitter lesson was learnt by the Federation leadership and its rank and file - bitter disappointment at the inaction of an incoming Scullin Labor

Government. That experience together with the brutal reaction by the Chifley government to the 1949 coal strike put the federation at odds with the Labor Party for many decades. Not until the passing of many of that generation in both the Labor Party and the union, together with the systematic removal of workers rights since 1996, has that relationship begun to recover. In fact it which probably not until 2001 after 5 years of bitter struggle with global mining companies did the Federations' successor, the CFMEU, warmly welcome a Labor leader to its National Convention again. That leader was Kim Beazley who I first met in 1999 during the struggle over Oakdale miners entitlements. Beazley immediately embraced the Oakdale miners and every miners struggle since then.

When Kim Beazley addressed the 2001 National Convention mining unionists again placed faith in the Labor Party to rip up the conservatives biased laws and introduce a system that defends workers rights and living standards. The next federal election in 2007 will see if the Labor Party has learnt the lessons of the northern district lockout and its political consequences. This time it is not only mine workers who have must place their faith in labor politicians delivering on their promises. It is every single working family in the country. The stakes could not be higher. The answer to this question will surely determine the very future of the Labor Party. I am confident that a Beazley Labor Government will deliver a fair system for workers, one that remain in place for another century and one that will prevent a repeat of Blair Athol, Gordonstone, Patricks, Hunter Valley and Rothbury!

Jim Comerford's book is a lifetime's work and the achievement of a lifetime. That it is published in 2006, the year in which Australian workers rights and living standards have been legislated away, is by accident the most appropriate year in which it could have been released. Today's generation of unionists must read this book. As an historical record of the events of 1929-1930 it is without peer. Its analysis of the economical and political dynamic of the time when the country was on the verge of the cataclysmic depression is essential reading. Its description of the brutality of the class war waged against northern district miners and their families and the social consequences of the starvation strategy could only be written by someone who lived through that period as a 16 year old. His description of the breakdown of union solidarity - between unions - is

contrasted with rank and file devotion to the structure of the Federation. Yet it remains a balanced assessment of the characters, events and outcomes of the time. This should come as no surprise – it is indicative of the valuable leadership role played by Jim as an activist and as a union leader in the many years after the lockout.

This book speaks to current and future generations of unionists about historical events that have important lessons for all of us. Most of all however this book speaks for the lockout generation itself whose voices are now mostly silenced with the passing of time and for whom Jim Comerford was so determined to speak.

Comerford, Jim (2006) *Lockout. The Northern New South Wales coal lockout 2nd March 1929 – 3rd June 1930. An eyewitness account of Australia's most violent industrial conflict.* Published by CFMEU Mining and Energy, Sydney.

Special Offer to readers of Common Cause

To mark the publication of Jim Comerford's *Lockout* book, the Union is giving readers of *Common Cause* the opportunity to purchase first edition hard back copies of this unique publication before it goes on general sale.

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