

FIGHTING LABOR'S CUTS: The NSW Social Security strike, May– June 1988

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Socialist Action and International Socialists, Melbourne, November 1989,
republished by [NTEU Fightback](#), Melbourne, 2020

Introduction

Since the mid-1970s, Australian workers have been on the defensive. There have been minor actions (for instance over wages in 1981), but they have been heavily outweighed by spectacular defeats, like the dismembering of the BLF and by the passivity and lack of confidence of workers in the face of major cuts to wages and conditions orchestrated by the Hawke government.

It's all the more remarkable, then, that we are able to produce this pamphlet about a strike by that government's own employees: a strike which was not only historic for its length and strength but was also a victory.

For six weeks in May and June 1988, workers in Social Security (DSS) in Sydney fought against government proposals to slash nearly 1,200 jobs from the Department nationally. It was by far the longest strike in the history of white collar public service unions in Australia. In the end, over 700 jobs were saved.

The story of this strike should be told for a number of reasons. There were many experiences during the strike from which we in DSS learned, and our lessons could be useful to workers in other workplaces and industries. More specifically, this dispute will influence future debates in the public service unions about tactics, about our power as workers and about the possibility of standing up to the government.

One of the earliest high points: a march and rally after the biggest mass meeting of the strike. As hundreds of striking public servants poured out into George Street traffic, heading for Wynyard, a startled motorcycle cop screeched to a halt and demanded to know where we were going. He displayed above-average intelligence by deciding not to try to stop us. Instead, he went to the head of the march and cleared a path for us. Behind the ACOA banner, we sang and chanted our way to DSS

headquarters, where we made our feelings clear to both management and scabs.

A key feature of the strike, as it moved into its third week, was the setting up of a Strike Fund, controlled by the rank and file Sydney delegates' committee. This was a very important move, and the money we collected – over \$16,000 – reassured workers who were losing pay week after week. Just as important was the way it was collected: teams of strikers went out with buckets and collected money from other trade unionists. For many, this was the first time they realised how much common interest they had with other workers. The lesson in solidarity was particularly effective on 9 June, when we took buckets to mass meetings of teachers and state public servants and collected an impressive \$4,500.

Picketing was a consistent part of the strike, a public and visible focus which acted as a rallying point for strikers. In such a highly decentralised Department, both local and head-office pickets were needed to keep things together. As the strike wore on, the ingenuity of the picketers increased. Flying pickets were organised to 'blitz' particular offices, making life more difficult for the scabs there. The tales of heroic deeds performed by the flying pickets were lively, and these activities became very popular.

A variation on the flying pickets highlighted one of the key political elements of the strike. As Minister for Social Security, leader of the ALP Left, Brian Howe, was the key opponent. Howe had initiated the staffing cuts, and pressure had to be put on him to withdraw them. In the middle of the strike, he was silly enough to agree to make a Friday night speech to the Party faithful at St George Motor Boat Club in Sydney's southern suburbs. His special event was somewhat spoiled by a crowd of angry strikers!

Here was the central contradiction for supporters of the Left in the ALP. Confronted by the militant workers the ALP Left supposedly represents, Howe went white. A mixture of fear and anger distorted his face as his minders fought a path through the picket. We won't easily forget that expression; it symbolised the strength of the strike and foreshadowed the final result.

Apart from its length and strength, the strike was also historic in public service unionism because it was the first real **victory** won by ACOA and APSA members over staffing. It laid to rest the myth, surviving after years of attacks by both ALP and Liberal governments, that public servants are less powerful than workers in other industries.

The strike was led from start to finish by the rank and file Delegates' Committee in Sydney (SDC), which put recommendations to members in mass meetings every two or three days. In all, there were 13 mass meetings in six weeks. The delegates retained the confidence of the majority of strikers for the entire six weeks, overcoming the opposition of all the national officials and most of those in NSW.

The delegates were able to win an important argument with the union's formal leaders. The officials appealed constantly for unity – a principle which normally makes organised workers more powerful. But the unity they wanted was a unity, not in action, but in *inaction*; they were attempting to squash a fighting minority by appealing to the inertia and lack of confidence of the majority.

Against this, the delegates argued for a strategy which placed the fighting minority – workers in key head-office sections whose jobs would go first – at the centre of the action. If they were prepared to fight now, then that was the vital strength around which other workers could organise and build; not later, but immediately.

This argument, more than any other, has been a focus for debate since the strike ended. Not only opponents of the strike, but sometimes supporters of Trevor Deeming, the NSW ACOA Secretary who was sympathetic to the strike, now argue that it was a terrible mistake. There is a strong belief that it lost Trevor and his faction, Rank and File Action, the union elections late in 1988 and that it therefore cost heavily while achieving little.

One of our main reasons for writing this pamphlet is to counter such rewriting of history and to emphasise that the strike was a step forward both for DSS workers and for government workers in general.

This pamphlet has been written from the inside. We make no claims of 'objectivity'. Both authors have histories of militant activity as ACOA members in DSS, on which we have drawn in explaining the background to the events of 1988; and we were both involved in the leadership of the strike itself.

We write as socialists committed to a tradition of workers' activity and to socialism from below: a tradition which firmly embraces magnificent struggles like that waged by DSS workers in 1988.

Class Struggle in the Public Service: Why Did the Strike Happen When It Did? And Why in the Department of Social Security?

DSS workers have a history of militancy going back many years. But DSS must also be seen in the context of white collar workers and their unions (ACOA and APSA – now amalgamating to form the Public Sector Union – PSU). From relatively inactive beginnings, these unions have moved steadily into the mainstream of class struggle in Australia.

The fact that public servants were employed, not by a corporation, but by the State, tended to confuse their class position for many years. They were regarded as a special class with special interests and privileges. But this argument doesn't hold water when weighed against the facts. Public servants sell their labour for wages; they are subject to the decision making of bosses, as regards both the work they do and the conditions under which they work; and the fact that the 'boss' is the government doesn't change that. Indeed, it often makes life more difficult. A government which is trying to boost the business sector's profitability will tend to 'show an example' by cutting its own spending on wages.

Since the mid-1970s, the Public Service has lost its image as a stable, secure backwater of middle-class career bureaucrats. The Whitlam years brought an influx of workers as public sector spending increased. Pay campaigns saw big increases in the level of union membership. Large numbers of government employees are increasingly seeing themselves as workers, confronted daily by bosses whose chief job is to make them work harder.

This change reflects, in part, the state of the economy. Since the long post-war boom ended in the early 1970s, capitalism has been in crisis. This is reflected in slower economic growth, higher unemployment and inflation.

Australian governments have responded to these economic problems with a series of strategies, all supposedly justified by the need to raise Australia's international competitiveness. All have been designed to increase the profits of Australian bosses while cutting their costs. Strategies include: reducing the size of the public sector; wage cuts; encouraging the restructuring of work and the elimination of so-called 'inefficient work practices'; and promotion of the use of new technology in both the public and private sectors.

The squeeze on the public service has been a feature of Australian politics since Bill Hayden's Budget of 1975. Bosses and governments regard state expenditures as deductions from the profits available for profitable investment: deductions to be minimised in a period when profits are under pressure. The ALP is no exception. Like any government that wants to survive under capitalism, it must bow to the system and to its values.

So Labor and Liberal governments alike have attacked public expenditure from two angles. They have cut services provided by the state (mostly those benefiting workers and the poor) and they have forced the remaining areas of the public sector to operate on the cheap. 'Raising productivity' is the catch-phrase and has meant increasing workloads for public servants while cutting their real wages and staffing levels. This push, begun in a crude way under Whitlam and Fraser with the introduction of staff ceilings, has been fine-tuned under Hawke with 'dollar budgeting' and a massive reorganisation of work under the second-tier wage deal of 1987.

The result of these general attacks was the transformation of ACOA and APSA in the late 1970s and early 1980s from largely inactive 'associations' into real trade unions. Public servants began to organise, building delegates' structures, holding mass meetings, taking industrial action, going on strike. Tired right-wing leaderships were replaced by (mostly) 'left' Labor types who saw themselves as part of the trade union bureaucracy, confronting and/or negotiating with an employer in the same way as their colleagues in blue collar unions.

Throughout this period, DSS workers were in the forefront of the resistance to government attacks. The effect of the general attacks by the government is always magnified in DSS because of the nature of the work. High unemployment means high workloads and stress, and high unemployment has been a feature of the crisis, particularly with the spectacular blowouts in 1975–77 and 1982–83. This external pressure is increased by direct attacks by the government, turning many DSS offices into seething cauldrons of frustration and anger and many DSS workers into active union members prepared to fight back.

DSS members were prominent in the early fights with the Fraser government. In 1979, there were stand-downs in DSS offices across Sydney over work bans directed against new redundancy legislation. And DSS had consistently high turnouts for a series of one-day strikes over wage claims and Fraser's anti-union legislation.

But since the late 1970s, staffing levels have been the issue of overwhelming concern for DSS workers: the white collar equivalent of fights over speed-ups on process lines. It was a demand for extra staff that blew up in 1981 into a dispute lasting six weeks. Like the 1988 strike, the 1981 dispute was a landmark in public service unionism and a vital experience for many of those later active in 1988.

1981

The fight for jobs in 1981 was an *offensive action*, based on a demand for extra staff to cope with the extra workload. It partly reflected the mood in the working class at the time. Only months earlier, we had seen wage victories won by Telecom technicians and transport workers, blowing Fraser's wage indexation 'guidelines' out of the water.

But the character and strength of the 1981 dispute, like the 1988 strike, was largely determined by the workers' frustration and anger at the government's attacks. Workers with little experience of industrial struggle developed an enormous sense of solidarity.

Beginning with a lengthy period of work bans (designed to inconvenience the government but not the clients), the dispute escalated in November 1981 when the government moved to stand down anyone refusing to lift the bans. In the space of a week, 180 were stood down, and strikes and walkouts in solidarity occurred in offices across NSW and Victoria. While Victoria adopted an approach of avoiding stand-downs wherever possible, even by temporarily lifting bans if necessary, NSW had the advantage of having a group of activists across departments, already meeting regularly and sharing experiences. This was the Public Servants Action Group, commonly known as 'Grey Collar' after the name of the publication they had been producing since 1978. Most members were in the ACOA, but some were in APSA and, at times, Federated Clerks Union members were also involved. A number of the members were also members of socialist groups.

The group met weekly to discuss disputes in members' workplaces. Members drew on their pool of union and political experience to work out ways to encourage public service unionists to defend their own interests. Militants from various departments met as a caucus in 1981 to work out united positions before delegates' and mass meetings.

Members of this group realised that it was important to bring the dispute to a head, to preserve solidarity as far as possible and to keep control of the dispute in the hands of rank and file unionists. Throughout the dispute, Grey Collar opposed the officials' attempts to limit it to those already stood down. Members argued for an all-out strike over both the stand-downs and staffing levels. This tactic became even more vital when the government used its anti-union legislation, known as the *Commonwealth Employees (Employment Provisions) Act* (CEEP), to suspend members who had walked out. This provoked an historic, three-day strike across the public service in NSW, beginning with a march of 3,000 workers from the Town Hall to DSS State Headquarters.

Unfortunately, pressure from the officials effectively killed any ongoing action. A meeting in a park in the rain, preceded by strong campaigning for a return to work, gave them the vote and left DSS members to face the music alone again. Isolated and threatened with sackings under CEEP, DSS members accepted a non-deal of a 'joint staffing review' and returned to work two days later.

Although the 1981 dispute ended in a demoralising defeat, the experience was not lost on those who went through it. Later, apparently unconnected increases in staff vindicated the workers' actions; the high level of rank and file activity ensured that the basic union and delegates' structure in NSW remained intact; the limitations of a strategy based solely on bans, without a strong response to stand-downs, became obvious; and a base of militant opposition to the union officials was established which eventually saw the hated NSW Secretary Barry Cotter, himself a member of the Labor left, thrown out by a more left-wing ticket.

The Left Campaigns

During the recession of 1982–83, the level of industrial militancy dropped sharply – a process accelerated by the election of the Hawke ALP government in 1983. In the run-up to the election, union officials opposed any industrial action which might jeopardise the ALP's electoral chances. After it, they became signatories to, and enthusiastic propagandists for, the Prices and Incomes Accord. The Accord secured a low level of strikes and disputes and a decline in real wages.

In these circumstances, the network of militants around Grey Collar declined, and the group dissolved itself in 1983. Some of its members, including the current writers, continued as socialist militants in the union. Others founded another group, Rank and File Action (RFA), with a strategy based on replacing the officials in ACOA in the 1985 NSW elections.

The RFA candidate for Branch Secretary was Trevor Deeming, a respected DSS delegate, an activist with a reputation for sincerity and a long-standing history of opposition to Barry Cotter.

The RFA platform was one of union democracy with mild left-wing touches. In a close vote, it was undoubtedly the hatred of Cotter after years of sell-outs which pushed Deeming into office. Cotter's supporters, however, retained the other key official positions and kept control of the powerful Branch Executive (BE). Wendy Caird, the new Assistant Secretary, had been a strong Cotter supporter. Technically second in control, she effectively ran the Branch, controlling both the numbers on Branch Executive and – through that power – the loyalties of organisers and staff in

the Branch office, whose continued employment was determined by the BE. Caird soon became the other dominant personality in NSW ACOA politics, and her 'machine' lined up with the union's national officials, headed by Peter Robson from the ALP Left. She also took over the Branch publication, *White Collar*. Deeming was effectively marginalised, excluded from much of the decision making and constantly attacked by the majority Caird faction.

Narrow though the vote was, Deeming's election was something of a watershed, particularly in DSS, RFA's strongest base. Instead of feeling that they effectively had two sets of enemies (Management and Cotter), DSS workers could now expect support from the Branch Secretary when they went into battle over staffing levels.

In fact, our experiences in the next two years were contradictory. Certainly, Deeming and RFA supported the disputes at the outset, and that support helped them get off the ground. But in both cases, Deeming and a section (not all) of RFA supported successful moves to call off the action well short of a satisfactory result. In 1986, this was greeted with confusion and disappointment by a militant minority of workers at a Sydney mass meeting. By 1987, there was outright anger, with a *majority* in Sydney voting against Deeming, many of them screaming at him from the floor of the meeting.

The fact that most of these same militants trusted Deeming throughout the 1988 strike is a phenomenon we will discuss later. But Deeming's basic shift – from rank and file militant to vacillating bureaucrat – was no surprise. It was not simply a matter of personal ambition or of a 'flexible' approach to principle on Deeming's part; rather, it was a question of the role of trade union leaders in general.

As brokers between capital and labour, negotiating with the bosses and enjoying privileged working conditions, it is not surprising that union officials constantly opt for compromise and spend time and effort selling poor deals to the workers.

Like many well-intentioned militants before him, Deeming learned the hard way that a full-time, paid union position carries with it pressures and responsibilities which will transform any individual who takes it on. These pressures – to negotiate, to compromise, to deal on equal terms with bosses and governments, to accommodate the most backward members – can only be resisted if the individuals are kept under the control of an organised, militant grouping with the political understanding to deal with them.

The inevitability of Deeming's shift lay in the fact that nothing remotely like this existed. Even Grey Collar at its peak had nothing like the roots, organisation or political base in the union to be able to control a member elected to full-time office. And Grey Collar, for most of its existence, was vastly stronger in this regard than RFA. RFA had a range of supporters who would endorse campaigns, distribute leaflets and so on. But its activist core was very small and proved incapable of binding Deeming to key decisions the group took. To some extent, the problem was exacerbated by sympathy for Deeming, who was clearly suffering savage personal attacks in the Branch office.

But the *political* problem was fundamental. A majority of RFA and its supporters did not even understand the problems created by Deeming's election as Secretary. They seemed to have been blinded by the illusion about the importance of capturing the positions; the contradictory class pressures felt by a union Secretary were never taken into account.

And if you don't understand the problem, you certainly can't come up with the answers. RFA never seriously attempted to discipline Deeming, even when he supported a sell-out in DSS in 1987 which RFA had opposed. RFA made no attempt to organise among wider layers of militants to bring Trevor under control. Indeed, criticism of Deeming from the left usually saw RFA closing ranks in his defence.

The Deeming experience was a contradictory one. We rightly supported and welcomed his election because of the space it would create in the union for militants. Deeming called meetings and supported action which would have been opposed violently by his predecessor. But our support was limited because the illusions in Deeming were dangerous, as DSS workers and others found from experience.

1986–87: Dress Rehearsals.

The real genesis of the 1988 strike was in the campaigns over staffing levels waged during the previous two years. Although both were defeated, the experiences became important when tactics were being considered in 1988.

In 1986, the pressure on staffing levels and government expenditure was stepped up by the Hawke government. Using the Expenditure Review Committee to put pressure on departments, the government abandoned 'staff ceilings' in favour of restrictions imposed through 'average operative staffing levels' and later 'dollar budgeting' (bureaucratise for setting staffing levels through arbitrary budget decisions rather than according to workload).

Flare-ups continued. DSS had already begun a massive computerisation (Stratplan) in 1984, which had met with substantial resistance from DSS workers until details of its introduction – including major health and safety gains – were agreed. One of the chief reasons for opposition to Stratplan was a fear that jobs would be slashed once the computers came in. Although the system had not yet produced the efficiencies to justify cuts in workload terms, the government invented the ‘Stratplan Harvest’ as one of its fictional justifications for staffing cuts over the next three years.

Hawke and Keating began to go on the offensive seriously in 1986. In June, Hawke announced a freeze on public service staffing levels. The Budget included a cut of 2,000 jobs. This would be followed in 1987 by another invention, ‘efficiency dividends’, a fictional rationale for further job cuts of 1.25% per year for the next three years.

For DSS workers, confronted daily by huge workloads and increasingly desperate clients, talk of staffing cuts was greeted with astonished anger. In 1985, there had been sporadic protests, including a two-and-a-half-day strike at Bondi office in Sydney, demanding three extra staff. In 1986, these protests shifted up a gear, with the imposition of the old stand-by, national work bans.

The demand was basically for a ‘buffer’ of extra staff to be provided for a given period, pending a staffing review which, officials assured us, would lead to more permanent jobs.

This was Trevor Deeming’s first real test as NSW State Secretary. He, like all experienced unionists, knew that work bans can only ever be a temporary tactic, because they invite the employer to stand down the workers imposing them. At that point, the question arises: do we escalate to some form of strike action? Or do we admit defeat and lift the bans? Do we adopt the militant fighting option, or the so-called (by officials) ‘responsible’ option?

Deeming and RFA failed this test, a mere 9 months after he took office. His recommendation was to lift the bans and accept a ‘Joint Staffing Review’ with the government: a tired and transparent old ploy, clearly designed to tie staffing claims up in months of meaningless ‘research’ and red tape. A motion from militant delegates, to retain the bans and to escalate industrial action if anyone was stood down, drew substantial minority support at the Sydney meeting.

In fact, workers in many offices met locally over that summer (traditionally the busiest time in DSS offices) and reimposed the bans in their offices in the face of enormous workloads. Clearly, the fight was not over.

By 1987, even the officials appeared to have learned the lesson that bans are not effective. When a national campaign began around a claim for 1,026 staff and the withdrawal of the threatened Stratplan cuts, National Secretary, Peter Robson, made it plain that strike action would be necessary to win. Robson pursued the claim with apparent fervour through four one-day stoppages; then, with an offer of only 401 and the Stratplan cuts still on the agenda, he gave in. Supported by Deeming, he assured a Sydney meeting that this was 'the best we could get'. Given that it still represented an enormous cut in the long term, and that individual offices still had to mount individual campaigns to get their share of the 401, the dispute can only be described as a pitiful defeat – and Trevor Deeming had played an important part in the sell-out. While most members of RFA did not support the settlement, they were quick to defend Trevor, saying that he was under threat of losing his job if he defied Robson. In that case, the militants retorted, the correct thing to do was surely to stand on his principles and call for the members' support against any attempt to 'discipline' him for acting in their interests.

1987 included two pointers to what lay ahead. Firstly, there was overwhelming support at one point in NSW for a motion to stay out for a second day, turning a one-day strike into two days. Secondly, there was a strong feeling among militants afterwards that one-day strikes were not terribly effective. If we're going to strike for four days in future, they said, let's make it four consecutive days.

1988

The disappointing result in 1987 did nothing to ease workloads in DSS. The government gave most Regional Offices one extra person, along with extra work for them to do – primarily harassing beneficiaries.

But State Headquarters (SHQ) effectively got nothing, despite having some of the largest, most overworked and understaffed sections in the Department. The anger and militancy of SHQ members grew.

Such was the climate into which DSS management dropped its new plans for 'devolution' of SHQ functions in 1987. Whole forests were sacrificed to produce material justifying a massive restructuring involving major relocations of staff from SHQ. The Department wanted to cut almost 3,000 jobs nationally, with NSW to lose 303 jobs almost immediately.

New Area Management offices dotted around NSW would do most of the current SHQ work, but with 303 fewer jobs. The rest of the work would be devolved to Regional Offices, with no mention of extra staff. Any vacant jobs in Regional Offices would probably be filled by surplus SHQ staff,

disrupting career structures, and Regional Offices themselves faced a further round of cuts within the next two years.

Workers who were tired of continuing staff cuts combined with more work now showed that they'd had enough.

The dispute became serious in February, when ACOA members in SHQ walked off the job for a day, imposed bans and called for a moratorium on devolution until agreement was reached on all the issues. We drew up a log of claims and pressured the ACOA National Office into taking it up – including firm rejection of any job cuts – and presenting it to SHQ meetings in other states for endorsement. Delegates also presented the case strongly to Regional Office delegates, who expressed support at an SDC meeting.

The log of claims was revised and endorsed by SHQs around the country. Once this had happened, our national union officials were prepared to present it to the Department, sit back and wait for talks to begin.

Members in NSW were not so laid back. Regional Office members in Sydney, realising the cuts meant more work for them and that the placing of surplus staff in offices could destroy their career structures, recognised that the fight was theirs as well. After the SHQ walkout in February, the Sydney delegates' SDC, with a long history of militancy and solid on-the-job organisation, voted to call for joint mass meetings. With Trevor Deeming of RFA as Branch Secretary, we had a reasonable expectation that a meeting would be called.

Nothing happened. A statewide DSS delegates' meeting (BDC) on 14 March repeated the call. Still, nothing happened. Deeming didn't oppose the meeting, but there were always 'practical problems' or other priorities. The SDC passed the same motion on 20 March and again, almost frantic, on 12 April. The mass meeting finally took place almost two months after the initial request, on 28 April 1988.

The delay showed that, for all our experience and strong rank and file organisation in DSS, we were not able to organise a mass meeting (and therefore a strike) independently of the union bureaucracy. This reflects conditions not only in ACOA, but among the working class as a whole in this period. Unlike earlier periods (like the late 1960s and early 1970s), there was very little large-scale industrial action organised by workers independently of their officials.

So having Deeming elected as Secretary was important. We knew that asking him to call a mass meeting was realistic and we expected that he

would do it – as we knew that, in other states, similar calls would be ignored. But why did Deeming take such an interminable time to call the meeting? The delay threatened and could have destroyed the morale of SHQ members, as they waited for support, and it left management two months to continue the planning and the propaganda around devolution.

The problem was that Deeming, previously a solid militant delegate, had become a Branch Secretary in politics as well as title. He and RFA bent to all the predictable pressures of the job. Want to get re-elected? Be reasonable; see all sides; listen to the ‘moderate silent majority’ in the union as well as the hot-heads; explore negotiations; don’t give the Caird faction anything to attack you with; don’t antagonise the national officials unnecessarily.

Most of this wasn’t argued out, of course. Typically, in terms of Deeming’s (and to a lesser extent, RFA’s) vacillations throughout the strike, it was presented rather as confusion, practical problems and pessimism about the prospects of winning. The fact that it took two months to get that meeting shows the weakness of RFA’s strategy for taking the union forward. Nevertheless, under intense pressure from delegates and SHQ members, Deeming finally did call the meeting. Assistant Secretary Wendy Caird and her supporters used every avenue to block the dispute.

The Strike Begins

If Deeming was nervous about calling mass meetings to start with, he was running in reverse after the first one. On 28 April 1988, a massive city vote in favour of a further meeting and united action against job cuts was outweighed by a country vote against further action. Was the dispute dead?

At the subsequent SDC, all the arguments pitching unity in passivity against the unity in action of those prepared to fight were repeated. The militants prevailed. A Sydney-only meeting on 10 May walked out for the rest of the day and called for another statewide vote a week later. At the next vote, after some telephoning to country offices and flying visits to the Illawarra and Hunter regions, the tally was 575–331 for a two-day strike. Finally, united action against the staff cuts was underway.

It is worth noting that, right from the start, no one had seriously talked about using a bans strategy to fight devolution. Certainly, devolution was banned, as were the next stage of computerisation and other government initiatives involving extra work. But neither the most conservative delegates nor the Caird supporters even attempted to argue that bans were enough.

The traditional, conservative argument that 'if we go out, we'll hurt the clients' was not heard much either. This represented something of a coming-of-age in DSS unions. Participants in the strike rejected the 'nurturing' role which the government tried to push on us, recognising that service to clients is dependent on the resources we are given – which was the very issue we were fighting about.

On 19 and 20 May, striking workers closed many offices and severely disrupted services at others. This first 48-hour strike was well observed. Even some SHQ managers who had never been known to take industrial action before went out for both days. Feeling against devolution and its consequences was definitely running high.

The vote had called for further meetings on Monday 23 May, so the SDC met on 17 May, after the result of the first vote was known, to decide what to recommend next. The members (accurately) regarded the delegates as leading the action, so the SDC recommendation was crucial. From this point until the very last meeting, the SDC motion was carried at every mass meeting.

The possible options were quickly narrowed down to two. Both RFA members (led by Trevor Deeming) and Caird supporters argued that we should pause at this stage to 'assess the impact' and await some result of our action. That way, we could get more information to members and could lobby for a further strike – perhaps a week away – while giving management time to respond. They argued that members would not support an immediate second stoppage. We could also attempt to get APSA involved. At this stage, APSA members, who had no delegates' committee, had been unable to pressure their officials to get that union involved, although members in some workplaces had decided to strike with ACOA members.

Members of Socialist Action and International Socialists (IS), together with other militant delegates, argued that immediate follow-up action would be more effective. Rather than waiting for the impact, we should increase the shock value by piling one walkout on another – something which management would not be expecting and which would undoubtedly shake them. They had already had months to respond to our demands, and time was running out. As far as APSA members were concerned, the number who had voted at workplace level to support the strike was heartening. This would put more pressure on their officials than anything else. Negotiations should definitely not be used as an alternative to action or as an excuse for delaying action which was long overdue. In any dispute, momentum is vital. To wait for the less committed members is to risk losing that momentum and also losing the possibility of broadening support.

These arguments swayed the delegates, and they voted to recommend a further 48-hour stoppage on 24 and 25 May. They also decided that individual meetings on 23 May should vote on a motion to walk out for the rest of the day. This was a practical move to achieve what would effectively be a 5-day strike in Sydney, while allowing country members to vote at work.

On Monday 23rd, voting across the state supported the further 48-hour strike – though by a reduced majority. The Sydney meetings and one office meeting voted to stay out for the rest of the day as well. The next meetings were set for Thursday 26 May.

The SDC met on Tuesday 24 May. RFA again stated that members would not support another immediate strike, and they had racked their brains for an alternative. They came up with a rather pathetic mish-mash: a return to work on the Thursday, with public contact bans on Friday and thereafter on each Wednesday; a 48-hour stoppage each Thursday and Friday; bans on the May Economic Statement; and further action as determined by each workplace.

Effectively, this meant an end to the dispute. Members would return to work each Monday to find two days' work piled up on their desks. Every week, we'd be working three days and trying to get through five days' work. How long would members continue to strike for those two days? Any momentum the struggle had developed would be killed instantly. The further proposal to meet again in a few weeks to consider escalation was greeted with derision by the more militant delegates. Escalate to what? Another five-day stoppage?

Against this vacillation, we maintained that members should keep going if they wanted to win. A winning strategy was not one that delayed action. The only really effective action was to stay on strike. We proposed to extend the stoppage for another two days. This was the first occasion when the possibility of an indefinite strike was seriously discussed by the delegates, and the word 'indefinite' predictably led to some panic and to mud-slinging by the more right-wing delegates (Caird's supporters among them).

Most delegates believed that a continued strike was a better option, and that motion was carried at SDC, by nine votes to five. This became the official SDC position for the meetings on Thursday 26 May.

At this stage, Caird's supporters panicked. A motion was organised to be moved by two delegates from Mayfield Office in the Hunter Valley, calling the strike off. It was accompanied by a supporting statement which was

essentially a diatribe against Sydney delegates. Although this was a transparent move (since neither Caird nor her supporters were attracting much support for calling off the strike in Sydney), it was likely to act as a focus for the more isolated and conservative country members.

We should probably have responded by stepping up our contacts with country members and campaigning hard for the strike to go on. RFA's response, unfortunately, was to assume once again that the SDC motion would be lost and the dispute over. So they decided to move their hodge-podge position, still effectively calling the strike off but pretending that action could continue around on-off strikes and bans.

That Thursday then became a day of enormous contradictions. The Sydney meeting was the largest yet, with over 500 packed into Trades Hall. Despite the confusion, despite the spectacle of RFA moving a motion that would end the strike, despite Deeming's political gymnastics in arguing for a vote for both the SDC and RFA motions, the mood remained high. Only 60 people voted against both the SDC and RFA motions, and only 20 of them had the guts to vote for the motion which was christened the 'via Mayfield motion'.

What followed was the noisy, morale-boosting march up George Street mentioned in the introduction. No permits, no formal marshals – just hundreds of angry workers and an escort provided by a couple of astonished motorcycle cops who happened to meet us in the street. A few speeches, some street theatre, lots of abuse hurled at scabs, our first decent media coverage and we wound up ready to continue the strike through the weekend.

How We Built the Strike

Regular pickets inside workplaces ...
... or inside, where possible! The invasion of Marrickville
Speaking at mass meetings
Voting at mass meetings
Demonstrations
Seeking support outside our own union
Leafleting and discussing the issues

Rescuing the Struggle

Then came an apparently catastrophic blow. Delegates assembling at an SDC were hit with the bad news. While the SDC motion had been won in Sydney, it had been defeated on a statewide count, by only about 50 votes. Total confusion surrounded the statewide vote for the RFA motion. This

immobilised the SDC all afternoon, until it was apparent that there was no option but to return to work on Friday morning and see what happened. A motion to schedule a Sydney mass meeting immediately – which the SDC voted for unanimously – died as the afternoon wore on, with RFA, fascinated as always by bureaucratic manoeuvring, haggling over which votes were valid and what the real result was.

Members returned to work on Friday morning to find two conflicting telexes awaiting them. The first, in the name of the Branch President, Michael Gleave (though unsigned), stated that all motions had been lost. The second, from Deeming, stated that the RFA motion had been carried and should be implemented. Members in most offices met that morning. Most metropolitan offices decided that they believed Trevor Deeming, and counters were closed. Others were confused, and arguments raged. SHQ members, having no bans to be applied, felt particularly demoralised and frustrated.

The news that a special BE meeting was being held that morning, to overturn the vote formally, was the last straw. Two Sections in SHQ, which had been meeting already to discuss the next move, walked out and invaded the BE meeting.

Despite a stormy meeting, where at least one of her traditional supporters voted against her, Caird had the numbers to quash the vote. Officially, none of the three motions had been carried. Delegates who had stayed in SHQ rang Regional Offices with the news and convened a meeting of all SHQ members for 2pm. We told RO delegates that we would move for a walkout and a metropolitan-wide mass meeting the next Monday. This roused some enthusiasm in many offices, and the response was immediate: if you walk out, we're going too. Some, starting with Darlinghurst and Crows Nest, went further; anticipating that the SHQ walkout motion would be carried, they decided not to wait around for the result. About eight Regional Offices walked out and sent members to the SHQ meeting, to throw support behind the militants. They were greeted enthusiastically by SHQ members, many of whom had thought that SHQ was now on its own.

This was the turning point of the strike. Members had gone back to work, the strike bureaucratically squashed. But the rank and file looked down the barrel of the gun and decided that this was defeat and that they wanted no part of it. The spontaneous walkouts, although fragmented, were strong and effectively led. From being on the point of collapse, we rebuilt the strike with a new momentum.

Deeming and Alison Adler (Branch Vice-president and also a member of RFA) attended the impromptu SHQ meeting but opposed calls for a metropolitan mass meeting. They lost the argument; a motion was passed which condemned the BE for overturning a valid membership vote and called for a walkout for the rest of Friday and a metropolitan mass meeting on Monday.

At an emergency SDC that night, it was clear even to RFA that continued wrangling about the vote would be counterproductive. Of course, the SDC condemned the BE's actions and called for its resignation. But the real job was to organise the Sydney mass meeting on the Monday and rescue the action against staff cuts – a job begun very effectively by the members who had walked out across the city that day.

Amazingly, Deeming and some members of RFA still wanted their bits-and-pieces strategy recommended to the mass meeting. They lost the argument; the SDC recommended going out again and staying out until Thursday, when a mass meeting would coincide with an already planned statewide delegates meeting (BDC). BDC delegates should be invited to that mass meeting, in the hope that a first-hand view of the strength of feeling in Sydney would persuade them to support us and to re-kindle the dispute in the country.

Monday's meeting endorsed the SDC position, this time firmly rejecting the RFA strategy. The turning point reached on Friday had now led to a strong new direction: Sydney workers had made it clear that they wanted the country members involved but would not be voted back to work by them. And RFA finally seemed to realise how determined the members were to strike until the job cuts were withdrawn.

Monday's meeting also demanded ongoing reports from National Secretary Robson on negotiations and on action in other states. In organising strikes in other states, the National Office restricted them firmly to one day a week, involving only SHQ members. Attempts by the BDC in Victoria to spread the action to Regional Offices met with strong resistance from their officials (and some delegates).

In NSW, the Caird faction, which controlled the Branch office, made it extremely difficult for strikers to organise effectively. No space was allocated to us, and access to phones, typewriters and photocopiers was very restricted. The attitude was that everything had priority over the strikers; we should not be allowed to disrupt the day-to-day work of the Branch one iota. Appalled members had to come to terms with the nature of the union bureaucracy. Expecting support and cooperation, they found intolerance and abuse. In the National Office, also based in Sydney,

arguments developed when we were forced to use their facilities. 'The National Office isn't supporting this strike', we were told by one National organiser.

During the week leading up to the BDC, intensive lobbying by Caird's supporters (one of whom was provided with an office and a phone) promoted the idea that the city members had gone crazy and that their continued actions were undemocratic. The SDC meeting on Wednesday 1 June pandered to this scaremongering by passing a resolution recommending a continuation of the strike for three days, but with a request to BDC to then convene statewide meetings to vote on a single motion. RFA, among others, argued that country members were feeling 'left out' and that further refusal to consult those members would drive a wedge between city and country. They also engaged in some mild red-baiting, accusing the delegates of being led by the nose by the socialists among them. This insult provoked angry reactions from everyone concerned.

The City Resolves to Fight Alone if Necessary

The 'unity' argument recurred throughout the dispute. In the early stages, we had been told to wait for APSA, as our strike would be less effective without their members. This was undoubtedly true, but it would also have been weakened by delay. In practice, the large numbers of APSA members who supported ACOA put so much pressure on their officials that they sanctioned the members' involvement in the metropolitan area. Sick of listening to arguments at mass meetings about whether or not they were allowed to vote, APSA members finally organised an invasion of their own Branch office on 2 June. Ignoring appeals to 'just send a delegation of two or three', about 40 of them bailed up their officials and demanded that APSA's involvement in the dispute be formalised. As is so often the case, pressure from below was the only effective way to make the officials drop their opposition.

The same was true of the city/country rift. The response was very uneven in the country offices. Some voted for strikes, some scabbed consistently and some, while disagreeing with the strategy, rightly abided by the majority decision. Nevertheless, there was a geographical split, in terms of organising meetings and votes, which could have been overcome if the officials had been prepared to build on the existing support. Instead, they seemed determined to play up the differences, in the hope that the country would keep the city in check.

Without denying that a rift existed, the militants considered that such a strong and active group, in a union with few traditions of class solidarity, should not allow itself to be pulled back to wait for any less politically

advanced group to catch up. This was particularly true since the dispute had already built up so much momentum. We had to keep taking the lead and arguing that the country offices and the other states should either join us (the best option) or should provide other support designed to help build the dispute.

This position was put to members at the next day's mass meeting, but they endorsed the SDC proposal for a statewide vote. Predictably, it was a highly charged meeting. Country delegates declared that they had been 'disenfranchised', and Wendy Caird (who had actually disenfranchised them by overturning the last statewide vote) alleged that city members had referred to country members as 'slinking scabs'. This was untrue and was clearly designed to inflame the situation. Uproar followed, and Caird was unable to finish her speech.

This meeting was notable for the first appearance of Peter Robson, who professed himself amazed and impressed by the determination of members in NSW. He was not so impressed, however, that he neglected to advise us to curtail our actions and get into line with the other states.

The BDC met after the mass meeting to formulate a recommendation for statewide meetings. The left proposed that there be two separate motions: one for the city, to stay on strike, and another for country offices, to come out in support. The right attempted to restrict striking to one day a week, in line with the action SHQs were taking in other states, but to include Regional Offices in the action in NSW. Any additional action could be determined by any group (i.e. the city could stay on strike if it wished). BDC endorsed a middle-ground motion proposed by RFA, calling for a two-day strike every week and a series of bans and including the 'any additional action' clause.

BDC also accepted that NSW should now become involved in national negotiations. A team consisting of Trevor Deeming and two workplace delegates was elected, on the understanding that they would be accountable to delegates and members and would maintain our firm position of 'no job cuts'.

The next SDC resolved, with very little argument, to recommend that the metropolitan areas stay on strike, regardless of what the country offices decided to do.

This SDC also saw the beginning of the Strike Fund. An IS member who had been given \$20 on a picket line proposed that the SDC set up and control its own fund. The aim was twofold: to assist members in hardship after more than three weeks on strike; and to provide members with a

worthwhile activity – collecting – which would build morale, spread the word about our struggle and gain support for it. The SDC should retain control of the fund, as it was retaining control of the dispute, and so three delegates were elected to administer it. Strict guidelines were laid down and were endorsed by the members at the next Sydney mass meeting.

That mass meeting also endorsed the SDC proposal for Sydney to go it alone if necessary. Robson opposed this, and Wendy Caird was overheard after the meeting referring to strikers as ‘lemmings’. The truth was that Sydney members had made a vital decision that day. When the statewide vote went down, we were disappointed but not defeated. We had already made our decision.

Building the Strike

From this point on, metropolitan members threw themselves into strike support work. A routine developed: after picketing each morning, groups of activists would meet at ACOA Branch office and separate into committees to plan and carry out various activities. Offices where members were working received phone calls and visits; the media were contacted and interviews were arranged; flying pickets were set up, and ‘bucket brigades’ set out each day to collect for the Strike Fund.

The flying pickets turned into ‘Office Occupation Teams’. After picketing a selected office, they would march into the public contact area, holding up signs, chanting and calling on scabs to close the office and join the strike. Managers panicked and tried various eviction techniques, but the support from clients was heartening. At Redfern, where the manager closed the office, locked the strikers in and called the cops, clients waited patiently outside until the cops ‘ordered’ the imprisoned strikers to leave. Having refused to leave one by one in case of client reprisals, strikers were overwhelmed by the expressions of sympathy and solidarity they actually received when they did leave. Most clients seemed to realise that staff cuts affect service and that fights around staffing levels are in their interests too.

The Strike Fund took off quickly. Collections were done on picket lines and at various meetings, rallies and workplaces: wherever support could be sought from workers in other departments or other unions. Backbreaking trips to the bank and seemingly endless counting soon taught us that the average household bucket holds between \$250 and \$300 in coins – enough to provide a few days’ relief for members in hardship, but definitely no fun to carry! As the buckets filled, our spirits rose.

The week 6–10 June was the best one for collections and on one day we collected almost \$5,000. On Wednesday 8th, there was a Labour Council-

sponsored march and rally in support of a 6% pay claim. Workers gave generously, although Wendy Caird, representing ACOA at the rally, made no mention in her speech of the fact that DSS workers had now been on strike for almost three weeks. BWIU members from Adelaide were so impressed by what our collectors told them that they returned to SA and put bans on Commonwealth projects in support of our strike.

On Thursday 9 June, the PSA (NSW State Government workers' union), the NSW Teachers Federation and Telecom members all had meetings to which we sent collectors. Many workers expressed their support, both through motions passed by meetings and through money in the buckets. These responses raised morale considerably. The new Strike Fund total was announced to applause at each DSS mass meeting.

All this activity was vital both in terms of the reassurance the Strike Fund gave to members and in providing rewarding activities for strikers. Instead of hanging around at the Branch office or at home, they were talking to other workers, including blue collar workers, about the strike and gaining new determination from the discovery that we were not alone. For many, this was their first experience of class solidarity in action, and they found it heartening. Inevitably, a wider layer of activists grew around these tasks. More members joined occupation teams and bucket brigades; more members attended SDCs and took part in the discussions; more members spoke at mass meetings and found in the activities between meetings the best solution to the feelings of isolation and fear which arise during a protracted strike. Even some members who didn't agree with the strike tactic started to organise morale-boosting activities, such as sausage sizzles on picket lines.

Thanks to the media sub-committee, we finally began to get some media coverage. Until now, the media had virtually ignored the strike. People who spoke to reporters had been told that they'd already got the facts from Peter Robson; but no reports appeared. Strikers found this very demoralising. Although militants were well aware that the daily press would not give us sympathetic coverage, being more likely to support job cuts and/or stress the hardship we were causing to clients, it was undeniably true that any publicity would put pressure on the government. It would also let other workers know that something was happening, which could help win support.

The left pushed for better media coverage for another reason as well: to convince strikers that media coverage cannot be relied upon to win disputes. The media silence was reinforcing the belief, held by many, that clever use of the media could produce favourable coverage. Some had learned by experience in 1981 or in other unions that the bourgeois press

is on the side of the employers, not the employed, and they could cite instances of how facts had been twisted or suppressed. But many strikers had yet to see this process from the inside, distorting their own strike, and their morale was lower because of the silence.

Experienced delegates pointed out that it isn't necessary or desirable to rely on the bourgeois press and TV for coverage. Certainly, we could make sure that the bigger papers received up-to-date information, particularly contacting them about anything 'newsy', like demonstrations or occupations. Better still, we could use the 'alternative' radio stations, such as 2SER and Radio Skid Row, to put out a true account of what was happening. Left-wing papers would reach many unionists and potential supporters. We could also use local papers; some of these were cooperative and ran interviews with strikers from the local DSS offices.

We did have some success in getting wider coverage of 'stunts'. The media generally latched onto the 'occupation' stories, and strikers took to calling them as each new occupation took place. One TV station, told of a planned demonstration, asked, 'Will you have megaphones?' Assured that we would and that we would be noisy, they agreed to come.

One event which gave us particularly wide coverage was the demonstration against Brian Howe on Friday 17 June, four weeks into the strike. Howe had been predictably abusive in negotiations, accusing the strikers of disadvantaging the most helpless members of society. We thought this pretty rich, coming from the leader of the so-called 'left' in a government which had consistently attacked the most downtrodden members of society in the interests of supporting their big business mates. So when that day's SDC heard that Howe would be speaking at a dinner in Sydney that night, we immediately resolved to get out there and show him what we thought of his shabby treatment of DSS workers. With placards, buckets and a megaphone, pausing only to alert the media, about 40 of us set out for the St George Motor Boat Club.

We deployed our forces well: some at the front door, some at the side door, look-outs in between. When Howe arrived, he had to push his way past us, with chants of 'Hands off DSS' ringing in his ears. Although cops prevented us from entering the building, we held a noisy rally outside, certainly disturbing the ALP dinner. Some of us were interviewed by TV reporters. As a morale-boosting exercise, the demonstration was a huge success, and Howe can have been left in no doubt as to the extent of our anger.

Negotiations

Meanwhile, negotiations developed. Since Wendy Caird's unpopularity was serving only to inflame mass meetings and solidify the strike, Robson began attending regularly in her place. He was more capable than Caird of dealing with the situation, recognising the folly of attempting to smash the strike bureaucratically. He professed himself impressed with the extent of our commitment but made it clear that he did not consider the extended stoppage necessary. In his opinion, there was no need for Regional Offices to be involved. He was not prepared to do anything to spread the strike beyond token stoppages by SHQs in other states. To his credit, our elected negotiators reported that he was extremely tough in negotiation sessions, although of course rumours were rife about secret meetings with Howe away from the bargaining table. (Both were members of the so-called left in the ALP; but no evidence was produced. It is quite possible that Robson was merely following his own inclinations in urging us on several occasions to call it a day.) Tough negotiating, however, is only really effective when backed up by industrial muscle, and Robson's persistent refusal to extend the dispute made it all the harder for the negotiators to win.

As negotiations continued, the government's demands for job cuts crept slowly downwards. By the day of the Howe demonstration, cuts were down from 303 to 146 in NSW, and a reasonable conditions package was on offer. When we still resolved to stay out, there were threats that the conditions package would be withdrawn. This manoeuvre was designed not only to panic us into caving in, but also to drive a further wedge between NSW and the other states, who would blame us for putting the package at risk.

The SDC on Sunday 19 June took all this into account and was bitterly divided about whether to push on with the 'no job cuts' claim or whether to push only for a fairer distribution of the cuts (NSW cuts being relatively heavier than those in other states). RFA had the 'fair division' position, while the left argued that, since the good package and reduced cuts were offered only because of the action in Sydney, as Robson freely admitted, we should press on and fight for no cuts at all. This position was carried by 12 votes to 10.

On Monday 20 June, Robson recommended to meetings in all states that the offer be accepted. The other states agreed, with about 700 votes for and only 80 against. But Robson acknowledged Sydney's strength by refusing to tie us in to the national vote. After long and bitter argument, the Sydney meeting voted 119–241 against his motion, instead accepting the SDC recommendation to continue the strike.

Holding Out

Scared by the 'isolation' arguments, believing we could do no better, about 70 members in Sydney now returned to work – many crossing picket lines on which they had stood. This was a hard blow. Pickets at SHQ were particularly depressed to see several 'floors' of strikers giving up. At this point, the stronger Regional Offices, like Darlinghurst, Newtown and Liverpool, were providing most of the impetus for a campaign which had begun in SHQ. The dynamic had shifted, proving the truth of our arguments that SHQ and Regional Offices had to be involved together for a successful dispute. When one area faltered, another picked up the lead.

Those who stayed out redoubled their efforts, although there was a tendency among some delegates to go 'soft' on those who had returned to work, asking them only for continued support in the form of bans. The fact was that, although we found it impossible to regard them with the contempt we had for scabs, those who had gone back were weakening the strike and reducing our chances of winning. Our efforts had to be concentrated on convincing them to rejoin the strike.

Even some of the more militant delegates were beginning to show signs of demoralisation. At the next SDC there were two motions to return to work, nominating different days. However, the final recommendation was 21–5 in favour of staying out. Delegates also voted on a proposal to call for a Ministerial review of personnel practices in NSW. The left was cynical about the potential of such a review to achieve anything, but we did not oppose the motion strongly. It was carried 15–8 and was later endorsed by members, as was the motion to stay out. Howe was reported to be 'weakening'.

Trevor Deeming now, at last, under pressure from members, made some token moves towards spreading the dispute. He began to plan for a public service-wide meeting, although he did not have the courage to call this himself and risk the wrath of his opponents in the union bureaucracy. Instead, he and his supporters produced a petition which DSS members signed and passed around in other departments. The aim was to get enough signatures to 'force' Trevor to call a meeting under ACOA rules. This complicated manoeuvre took up a lot of strikers' time and energy, falsely raised hopes of wider action and then came to nothing.

Deeming did send a fax to all DSS offices, calling on members to take some supportive action (preferably striking) on Friday 24 June. This was quite effective, as seven country offices walked out and one banned public contact. Some Sydney members who had returned to work also heeded the call. The strike figures rose by about 300 for that day.

In response, Howe dropped the figures for demanded job cuts further; from 552 to 486 nationally and from 145.5 to 99.5 in NSW. He may have got wind of the fact that Deeming saw any offer under 100 as hard to reject; he may just have seen it as breaking a potential psychological barrier. In any case, Deeming now turned around completely, telling the SDC on Monday 27 June: 'I don't think there is much more to get' and 'I don't think in this forum and where we're going at the moment, that they'll come down any further – so I think we should go back'. RFA disagreed with him, but the vote was closer this time: 15–7 to stay out, still a two-thirds majority.

At the mass meeting next morning, Deeming moved a motion to accept the offer and return to work. In doing so, he went against the wishes of RFA members, who had clearly opposed this course and did so again at the mass meeting. They had had no warning that he intended to do this. The rift was obvious, but Trevor had the authority of the platform and office, and many members decided to believe him. As one said, 'Trevor's been with us all the way and if he says to go back, that's good enough for me.'

The truth was that Trevor had not been 'with us all the way'. He had bowed to pressure to call meetings, but had wavered throughout the strike. Members of IS and Socialist Action had argued that his resolve would probably collapse before the victory was won. In the end, RFA's confidence was shown to be misplaced.

By a very small margin, 165 to 153, members voted to return to work the next day. A tremendously supportive letter from the BLF, together with a donation, was then read. The letter was very moving and some members said afterwards that they were ashamed to have voted to go back. Had the letter been read before the vote, it could have changed it.

When the meeting closed, delegates stayed behind to discuss outstanding issues. Of course, since we were returning to work with a number of questions unresolved, relying only on the skills of our negotiators and the good will of the Department, it was inevitable that strikers would be victimised and penalised; and this did occur. Just for starters, all the strikers had their leave entitlements reduced and their leave accrual date moved permanently one month on.

Nevertheless, we went back to work in a mood of achievement and pride. Many areas made further, local demands, which were met; others waged furious battles in their workplaces.

If 1981, with its long aftermath of bitterness between strikers and scabs, is anything to go by, the enmities formed in 1988 will last for years. And so

will the pride and confidence of those who had held out, showing what industrial unity and strength could achieve.

Preparing for the Next Fight

Although the strike ended prematurely, with complete victory in sight, the achievement of the members was considerable. We had saved 785 jobs. Conditions won included 'no compulsory redeployment' and guaranteed maintenance of higher duties levels for agreed periods.

It was heartening to see that, even in a period of low industrial action, a small group of militants like the Sydney members *could* take on the government and the union officials and win. The strike was definitely a minority action even in Sydney, but it was extremely successful. In the last week, when the strike figures dropped and doom was predicted by officials, bosses and those who went back, the strikers won further reductions in the cuts.

Next time, we'll be better prepared. We can build on our experiences in this strike to ensure that the next one is even more successful.

The strike showed that unity, while important, is not as vital as providing a lead and that a group of militants can and should pull other, less politically experienced members forward with them instead of allowing themselves to be held back.

During the dispute, our union officials and the government used 'divide and rule' tactics. The attempt to isolate SHQs in the dispute was part of the same policy which was seen in the later CES staffing dispute (fought without assistance from members in DEET, their head office) and attempts to confine the Defence Service Homes privatisation to that section with only token support from the whole Department of Veterans Affairs. That attempt failed, largely because militants in Victoria insisted on organising strike action across the Department, but they failed to take a strong stand against job cuts, settling instead for guarantees of no retrenchments.

The DSS strike showed that it can be useful to have a left-wing official as Secretary in the union. The fact that Trevor Deeming was ultimately prepared to call mass meetings – something Caird would not have done – enabled the delegates to explain the issues and options fully to members. However, RFA's electoralist strategy hampered us at many key points, and Trevor's fears for his future finally led him to cave in.

The illusions members had in Trevor were definitely a problem, just as their distrust of Caird, so strong that she had to withdraw from meetings for a

time and be replaced by Robson, was an advantage in terms of keeping things going.

The practice of holding regular mass meetings every three days was effective in keeping members in touch and reassuring them that they could vote to go back at any time. While some thought that weekly meetings would be enough, most delegates saw a week as too long for a group without a tradition of indefinite strikes.

Having to run the strike ourselves, we learned to organise on the ground. Unfortunately, we started organising seriously relatively late in the strike, and the impetus came not spontaneously from the members but from a handful of delegates. The main reason for this was the continuing pessimism of the delegates, even ourselves; we kept expecting that the strike would end at any moment. We went into each mass meeting with trepidation and it took us too long to realise how much momentum the strike had built up. Only a minority was involved in the activities around the strike, although that minority became very active and effective. SHQ delegates have continued to meet as a group and have maintained good informal networks.

The organising experience we gained is now standing us in good stead. With a hostile bureaucracy in office in ACOA (now PSU) [later became CPSU] in NSW, we have been able to bypass uncooperative organisers and officials. Delegates and members who were once prepared to sit back and trust the officials have realised that pressure from below has to be kept up consistently if workers are to win anything through the unions.

And this is the way that socialist ideas can be put back on the agenda, even in a time of industrial downturn. Members realised how dependent they were on the officials to spread the action; and they saw that their efforts were continually hampered by them. In the end, the members must realise, as many already have, that we have only ourselves and our fellow activists to rely on. By seeing how we can unite to change things in one small area – our own workplace – we've got some real experience of how we can change this system for a better and fairer one.

The Black-leg Clerk

Carrington Street is an awful place,
From top to bottom it's a bloody rat race
But on the third floor I've booked my place
'Cause I'm a black-leg clerk.

Chorus

So join the union while you can
Don't wait til your dying day,
That may not be far away
You dirty black-leg clerk.

Mass meeting time and it's a fearful sight
The union members are ready to fight
Though I've scabbed all week, I'll claim my right
To vote as a black-leg clerk.

So listen scab, we'll make this vow:
Trevor Romer can't save you now,
We'll deal with the bosses and then show how
We deal with a black-leg clerk