

Version 1.0 | Last updated 11 October 2017

Food and Nutrition (Australia)

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Food grown and produced in Australia during World War I was used to provision the nation's troops in training and on ships to the theatres of war, and to supply imperial needs on the battlefield, though transport difficulties reduced Britain's reliance on Australian produce from 1916. In Australia itself, food assumed both material and symbolic importance in terms of its availability, distribution and cost; its impact on relations between the government and people; its role in intensifying class conflict; and its contribution to defining and gendering consumption as a political issue.

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Introduction

In the first weeks after war was declared in August 1914, the economy dominated public debate in [Australia's](#) parliaments as well as in commercial, manufacturing and labour organisations and the [press](#), although recruitment issues, training camps, and questions of security were also prominent. The first concern was the ability of the British navy to keep the lines of trade open, ensuring

“business as usual” for commerce and industry and enabling necessary food and other supplies to be shipped to [Britain](#) and the battlefronts. But domestic concerns about preventing cornering of foodstuffs and controlling their prices soon became a source of class conflict and a test of popular and business confidence in state and federal [governments](#). [Food](#) prices, unemployment and declining real wages sparked anger among workers, and stimulated activism among women across the political spectrum. Shortages of wheat and meat occurred when supplies of both awaiting shipping filled up available storage facilities, thus limiting further processing and supplies for the local market. Popular resentment peaked in industrial discontent and communal violence during 1917. This underpinned serious disillusionment and disengagement throughout Australia during 1918, reflected in the collapse in enlistments. The politics of food saw the profiteer demonised as much as the Bolshevik in the immediate postwar period and stimulated a lasting mass women’s consumer movement.

Early Expectations

As official home-front historian [Ernest Scott \(1867-1939\)](#) wrote, Australian authorities accepted that, “in any European war, their supreme function would be to maintain a more or less undisturbed supply of food and other material for the Mother Country”; indeed, the development of extensive food production in the settler colonies and [India](#) was regarded as “vital for the Empire’s defence”. Australia was a major supplier of Britain’s wheat and was also a “principal source of the British meat supply”. A major rationale of pre-war imperial naval defence schemes was, thus, to guarantee “the safety of the long sea routes by which these vital cargoes must sail”.^[1] [Dominion](#) troops were to be victualled as part of the British armed forces at a per capita cost to their governments, so the supply and transport of foodstuffs was of direct relevance to Australia’s citizen-soldiers.

Early uncertainty caused the cessation of most British shipping, and a severe drought in Australia saw a temporary shortage of meat and wheat available for export. Certainty and clarity were restored by the [British government](#)’s marine insurance scheme and its extension to dominion-registered ships, and by prohibiting export of Australia’s meat, wheat and flour except to Great Britain and the rest of the [empire](#), thus preventing exporters from keeping back produce while seeking the highest prices or allowing foodstuffs to reach enemy populations via exports to [neutral countries](#). Minor relaxations to these embargoes were soon allowed, but only with firm guarantees against re-exports.^[2] In early 1915, the embargoes were superseded by the British government’s quickly accepted proposal to purchase, for the duration of the war, the whole refrigerated beef and mutton supply available for export. Butter and cheese were also included. Intimations of problems this would cause for domestic supply, especially of meat, were soon evident in growing concerns about the shortage of ships with insulated space for refrigerated produce. Similar concerns about the shipping of wheat and flour arose after the record crop of 1915-1916, its size in part a consequence of extra plantings in anticipation of British war-fuelled demand. After some tough negotiations with the Australian prime minister over shipping and price, the British government finally agreed at the end of 1916 to buy the whole crop. But with supplies available in the Americas at lower freight costs, most

Australian wheat remained in storage with the surplus piling up in railway sidings and subject to the depredations of weather and mice.^[3] As with meat, this affected the availability and price of bread for workers' families and proved critical to home-front unity.

Political and church leaders and most of the press had hoped the war would create social consensus — a *union sacrée* — but they failed to understand that labour movement support was contingent upon fair treatment of working people, including protection against extortionate prices for food.^[4]

Food Prices and the Politicians

As Joan Beaumont rightly observes, Australians in 1914 had one of the highest standards of living in the world.^[5] But, as Jay Winter and Jean-Louis Robert note, absolute standards were less important during the war than people's perceptions that the sacrifices were fairly apportioned.^[6] The failure of the 1914-1915 harvest in Australia had already caused food prices to soar. A further alarming rise on the outbreak of the war triggered an emergency meeting of state and federal governments. The state premiers (who had primary powers over prices) promised to legislate controls.^[7] Situated in the national capital, Melbourne's workers and housewives were in the best position to exert pressure on both the federal and state governments.

Unemployment and "famine prices" were the main topic of discussion in trade union and labour circles.^[8] In Victoria's state parliament, Labor Party representatives attacked "profit-mongers": "the first thing they do when a cataclysm occurs ... is to put up the price of food".^[9] The liberal government, in accord with the premiers' conference agreement the week before, introduced a Prices of Goods Bill into parliament on 12 August. Conservatives opposed it as "socialistic" and, though a weakened measure was finally passed, it was scheduled to expire at the end of the year.^[10] Any illusions among working-class people that it would ease hardship for their families disintegrated. Labour movement women organised a special campaign in December, but the premier refused to see their delegates. Another act passed in 1915 was even more limited. The story was much the same in the other states.^[11] In the labour press, the cartoon caricature of the capitalist, Mr Fat, was now recast as the wartime food exploiter making profits while the unemployed starved or marched off to war.

Workers and unions retained some hope that the federal labour government (elected in September 1914) would take action, given its promise of a constitutional referendum to confer greater powers on the commonwealth with regard to prices and monopolies. In June 1915, after renewed pressure from the unions, the federal administration introduced the long-awaited legislation, and Melbourne's *Labor Call* optimistically referred to "the people's war declared" at last.^[12] Liberals and conservatives exploited wartime anxieties fed by casualty lists from Gallipoli to argue against the proposal. To ask people to make decisions on party questions was "an intrusion upon the sanctity of grief", they said. The "yes" case argued that the question was a national not a party one. The capitalists and landlords

had not renounced their profits and rents for the war effort, and the rising cost of food was making working-class men and women feel they were doing all the sacrificing.^[13]

The cost of living rose in all state capitals in the first year of the war, but it was greatest in the nation's centre, Melbourne. The value of the pound declined 22.68 percent; what had cost households twenty-two shillings and seven pence soon after the outbreak of war cost them twenty-seven shillings and six pence twelve months later.^[14] The apparent commitment of Attorney General [William Morris Hughes \(1862-1952\)](#) to the referendum cheered Melbourne's labour movement, but his introduction soon after of a war census to discover the numbers potentially available for military service had the reverse effect. *Labor Call* explicitly compared the two measures, warning readers that "The [prices] Referendum [was] for the purpose of safeguarding the people, while conscription enslave[d] them".^[15] Soon after becoming prime minister at the end of October 1915, Hughes succumbed to the state premiers' pressure to drop the prices referendum on the understanding that they would introduce legislation to transfer their powers to the commonwealth for the duration of the war. The unions' response was bitter. No one believed the states would surrender their powers to a federal labour government even temporarily. *Labor Call* concluded: "The profit thugs may exploit now with more safety than ever. The whole range of robbery is open to them".^[16] This pessimism was justified. The premiers had only promised to introduce legislation, not pass it. Ultimately, only New South Wales did so.

Housewives and Cooperative Organisation

Symptomatic of this widening political gulf was the failure of an attempt at cooperation among women to circumvent rising food prices.^[17] In July 1915, Liberal Party women's leader [Ivy Brookes \(1883-1970\)](#), with the blessing of the National Council of Women (NCW), organised a Housewives' Co-operative Association "to encourage co-operative buying and marketing of produce direct from the producer to the consumer". The following months saw the establishment of bulk-buying bureaus in the "thickly populated", "democratic" suburbs where there were no local markets. Women must "work together loyally and harmoniously ... like an army", proclaimed the *Housewife* journal.^[18] But working-class women did not rally to this call for consensus. Most lacked the cash or storage facilities to buy food in bulk, but their reluctance also reflects working-class women's suspicion of the middle-class leaders' motives. Cooperative schemes seemed a poor substitute for the promised referendum on price control, which liberals like Brookes opposed. In 1916, a much-diminished Housewives' Association dropped cooperative trading and, for the rest of the war, operated as a propagandist group preaching the conservative panacea of thrift and patriotic sacrifice.

In 1917, the Housewives' Association joined the other NCW affiliates to establish a council to "eliminate waste and promote efficiency". Beginning in Thrift Week in June, its program included "cookery demonstrations, lectures, public meetings and the distribution of 'thrift literature'"; lecture topics covered "food values, economical buying, ethics of thrift and 'unconsidered trifles'".^[19] The

campaign served the federal government's attempts to encourage people to put savings into war loans; symbolic of the [propaganda](#) produced was a recipe book "for the Empire". The small amounts saved by strategies such as substituting macaroni for meat would, it was argued, add to the treasury and "the staying power of the Empire".^[20]

Food Riots and Feminist Activism

Victoria's labour movement organisations, including women's groups, were outraged, seeing the call to sacrifice as a grave insult. Since the start of the war, retail prices of food and groceries in Melbourne had risen 28.2 percent and male wages only 15.4 percent. Unemployment was running at 10.6 percent. By mid-1917, meat cost five shillings more per week than before the war, unaffordable on the average male wage of less than three pounds. The labour movement now launched its own campaign about the cost of food. "Thrift" was a ploy of capitalism, claimed one labour paper, and "Winning the war did not mean starving the people". But labour leaders soon lost control of the cost-of-living campaign. From mid-August to late September 1917, erstwhile English suffragette [Adela Pankhurst \(1885-1961\)](#) led growing numbers of ordinary women in daily marches and occupation of the streets.^[21]

Centred in Melbourne, Pankhurst and her followers targeted federal parliament. They demanded the release of food in storage as well as the punishment of exploiters, and threatened to forcibly take the "people's food", but the government made no move to negotiate the release of meat and wheat locally, despite domestic shortfalls. Wheat rotted in railway sidings and, without freezing capacity, farmers were forced to limit availability of meat for the local market – hence the shortages.^[22] The women assembled outside Angliss meat works and butcher shops, as well as other food outlets and freezing plants, and were frequently dispersed by police after a few token arrests. The pinnacle of the demonstrations was a "torchlight procession" on 19 September, attended by approximately 10,000 people. Beginning at the Yarra Bank, the local gathering place for labour movement orators and protesters, an initial crowd of 2,000 moved along the riverside to Federal Parliament House at the top of the city, growing bolder as thousands more joined in. Two women carrying the red flag at the head of the procession were quickly arrested and the protest turned violent. Road metal was hurled at police and shop windows broken, with £5,000 worth of damage done in Collins, Russell, Bourke and Elizabeth streets.^[23] Window-smashing had occurred before and did so again the following Monday in the nearby working-class suburb of Richmond.^[24] The Riot Act was eventually invoked and over 400 volunteer special constables restored order in the streets. Adela Pankhurst, arrested on a number of occasions, eventually spent nearly two months in Pentridge prison.^[25]

While the leading feminist organisations did not officially support the street demonstrations and Pankhurst's violent methods, they opposed the harsh treatment of the demonstrators and the refusal of Prime Minister Hughes to hear their case. And they declared solidarity with wharf labourers who, in July 1917, instituted bans on loading wheat and flour for reshipment to Southeast Asia and the

Americas “until the cost of commodities was reduced to pre-war rates”.^[26] Eventually the cost-of-living issue merged with that of the time-card system, which prompted New South Wales railway workers to stop work on 2 August, marking the beginning of what became known as the Great Strike. The “wharfies” and many other Victorian workers went out in support of their Sydney comrades from 13 August, but the cost-of-living issue remained pre-eminent among the dock workers and they stayed out until November, well after all other unionists admitted defeat. As feminist journal, the *Woman Voter*, put it, the wharf labourers “did not strike for themselves, for better wages, better conditions. They struck for their class and for the community, against the increased cost of living, caused by gambling in food supplies. They struck for you and for me”.^[27]

From late August, the Women’s Political Association made arrangements for the Wharf Labourers Union to register their families at the Guild Hall (now Story Hall) so they could obtain food and medical assistance. Thus began the Guild Hall Commune. By early October, nearly 1,500 were being fed in the kitchen and restaurant on the premises and 5,000 others supplied with groceries. Conceived of as self-help and solidarity rather than relief, its activities were increasingly directed towards enabling the men and their families to be self-sufficient, with the wharf labourers themselves setting up services and securing provisions. Union members ran the various stores - second-hand clothing, grocery and baker’s shops, two boot-repair shops and a barber’s saloon - as well as a recreation hall and smoking room, and they also provided assistance to the women volunteers in the kitchens. The commune continued until February 1918, well after the strike was over.^[28]

No solution was found to the shortages and high prices of food. In August 1917, Hughes, under pressure from Pankhurst and the demonstrators, referred the question of food prices, the impact of exports on commodities, and market manipulation by combines to the Interstate Commission (formed in 1913). But the commission had little power and its reports, while conceding the impact on food shortages of produce locked in storage, denied any profiteering or conspiracy and did not produce any solutions.^[29] Prices continued to rise through 1918, popular resentment grew and enthusiasm for the war and recruitment fell, mirroring a growing conviction that equality of sacrifice was unimportant and that the subtext of government inaction on the cost of food was support for economic conscription in the wake of popular rejection of compulsory overseas service at two plebiscites.

The organisation behind the food riots proved ephemeral, and the Women’s Political Association, which organised the Guild Hall Commune, disbanded in 1919. But, in a context of continuing inflation after the war and a short sharp recession in 1920-1921 that caused further hardship, ordinary women became open to more permanent forms of activism. A new group of Housewives’ Association leaders seized the opportunity to redirect working-class women’s discontent and reinvigorated the Victorian organisation in 1920, modifying its politics to include consumer boycotts and offering serious economic advantages that included co-operative food purchasing. Thousands joined and the Housewives’ Associations, Australia’s first consumer-watch organisations, proliferated in all states. They cemented an economic identity among their followers that complicated class allegiances by

stressing that consumption must be accorded the same status and consideration in the functioning of the economic system as capital and labor.^[30]

Conclusion

As national and state governments in Australia increasingly prioritised the demands of war over economic justice and equality of sacrifice, the population of the major cities divided and entered into a period of violence and bitter recrimination that lasted from 1915 through the rest of the war and beyond. Class lines hardened and were increasingly inflected by gender and the politics of food. But the labor movement failed to capitalise on the women's activism or give more lasting organisation to the protest movement. The politicisation of food and cost-of-living issues in the postwar period thus lost much of its earlier class context.

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Notes

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Citation

Smart, Judith: Food and Nutrition (Australia) , in: 1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War, ed. by Ute Daniel, Peter Gatrell, Oliver Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer Keene, Alan Kramer, and Bill Nasson, issued by Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin 2017-10-11. **DOI:** [10.15463/ie1418.11163](https://doi.org/10.15463/ie1418.11163).

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