



Freed unionist shearers following the 1891 Shearers' Strike, 1893

TLF ID R8000

This is a black-and-white poster showing 13 shearers who had been jailed in 1891 during the central Queensland Shearers' Strike. Across the top of the poster, in large letters, is printed 'FREEDOM WITHOUT DISHONOUR' and 'UNIONIST PRISONERS'. The poster goes on to identify each man individually as having been sentenced at Rockhampton for causes connected to the 1891 'Bush Strike'.

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 ☐ No

Educational details

Educational value

- The jailing of the 13 union organisers during the Shearers' Strike was a highly controversial action and the poster reveals that feelings were still strong in 1893 when the men were released. Their trial took place against a backdrop of declining union morale and resources and a seemingly never-ending stream of non-union labour, known as 'scabs' or 'blacklegs', being available to shear for the pastoralists.
- On 5 January 1891 unionised shearers in central Qld had gone out on strike as they believed that organised pastoralists, insisting on freedom of contract and the right to negotiate with individuals rather than unions, were trying to reduce shearing pay rates and victimise unions. The unionists' demands included continuing existing pay rates, protection of workers' rights and privileges, exclusion of low-cost Chinese labour and just and equitable agreements.
- Central Qld at the time appeared to be on the brink of civil war, with the conservative colonial government sending more than 1,000 armed soldiers and special constables to protect non-union shearers. Armed camps of striking shearers were based on the outskirts of several towns and unionists carried out raids on shearing sheds, committed sabotage such as setting fire to crops and woolsheds, attempted to derail a train and verbally harassed non-union labourers.
- Fourteen union leaders, the entire Barcaldine Strike Committee, were arrested in central Qld in March and April 1891. Thirteen of the men were charged with 26 counts of sedition and conspiracy including unlawfully molesting workmen, using threats and intimidation, obstructing employers and using force to induce workers to join one of several unions.
- Arguments on the validity of the arrests and trial were various, the major one being that the government had invoked an antiquated 1825 law, already repealed in Britain. The prosecution based its case largely on speeches, letters and telegrams, while the defence produced no evidence at all in the 13-day trial. The undecided jury finally compromised and recommended that two men be set free and the others be treated with leniency.
- The union leaders were treated harshly. The jury's recommendations were ignored and the men each received three years' hard labour. Each man was also required to put up a £100 bond and two £50 securities, ensuring that he would be of good behaviour for a further year after that, or spend an additional year in jail. They were sent to the St Helena Penal Establishment, which was on a small island in Moreton Bay and featured tight security and natural isolation.
- The breaking of the 1891 Strike led to unionists becoming disillusioned with the use of direct action such as strikes to achieve improvements in their working lives, and saw the rise of the alternative idea of seeking political power. The Strike was therefore important in the formation of the Australian Labor Party. By 1892 the Party had emerged with a broad agenda to seek full adult suffrage and full employment, and the first unionist had been elected to parliament.

Year level