

Shearers' Strike 1891

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For almost four months during 1891, central Queensland was preoccupied with a feud between shearers striking against working conditions and wealthy squatters.

Recognised as one of Australia's first major industrial disputes, the strike occurred during the overseas-induced depression of the 1890s. Economic instability overseas impacted on falling wool prices in Australia, creating tension between the shearers and the pastoralists who proposed a reduction to the shearers' wages, which then stood at £1 per hundred sheep shorn. The shearers retaliated by refusing to supply their labour – a crippling blow to the wool industry.

In response to the strike, the pastoralists introduced non-unionist 'free labourers' who received the protection of police and troopers. Unionists staged parades and public protests with many arrested and jailed.

In February 1891, the centre of the strike shifted to Barcaldine – the terminus of the rail line from Rockhampton, and at the centre of the Mitchell district, the richest pastoral area of the colony.

Later, the strike committee was arrested at Barcaldine and were later tried for offences such as conspiracy, rioting and sedition. Thirteen of the union leaders were brought to trial at Rockhampton and sentenced on 20 May 1891 to three years at the penal establishment, St Helena. They were admitted to St Helena on 28 May 1891.

Despite the strength of union protest, the strike was unsuccessful. Many historians believe that the Shearers' Strike 1891 hastened the call for a political movement to represent the interests of working people, which later led to the formation of the Labor party.

Records at Queensland State Archives tell the story of these events, particularly through government correspondence, court and prison records such as:

Telegraph from Horace Tozer to Sir Samuel Griffith regarding developments in the Shearers' Strike and possible actions to be taken, 1 March 1891 (first page shown, full telegraph available in [Image Queensland: QSA Digital Image ID 2935](#))

Other links in Image Queensland relating to the Shearers' Strike 1891:

- George Taylor convicted of conspiracy: [QSA Digital Image ID 16575](#)
- Julian Alexander Salmon Stuart convicted of conspiracy: [QSA Digital Image ID 17778](#)
- Record for Julian Alexander Salmon Stuart admitted to H M Penal Establishment, St Helena on 28 May 1891, transferred to H M Prison, Brisbane on 11 May 1893 and discharged on 19 November 1893: [QSA Digital Image ID 16583](#)
- Charles Henry Smith Barry convicted of conspiracy: [QSA Digital Image ID 17779](#)
- Daniel Murphy convicted of rioting: [QSA Digital Image ID 17769](#)
- William Dover convicted of unlawful assembly: [QSA Digital Image ID 17773](#)
- Record for William James Bennett admitted to H M Penal Establishment, St Helena on 28 May 1891 and discharged 19 November 1893: [QSA Digital Image ID 16584](#)

More documents on the Shearers' Strike 1891 can be located using the [ArchivesSearch](#) catalogue.

This story, and other stories which highlight significant events in Queensland's history, appear in the Queensland Firsts exhibition available to view [online](#).

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