

1929 START OF THE GREAT DEPRESSION

*We're on the susso now,
We can't afford a cow,
We live in a tent,
We pay no rent,
We're on the susso now.*

So chanted the children of Australia's unemployed in the awful years of 1929 to 1934 as the Depression swept through much of the world, leaving the poor penniless, and the rich — in many cases — a little bit richer.

Australia was among the worst affected by the collapse of the international economy in the wake of the Wall Street crash in October 1929. A heavy dependence on exports of primary products, such as wool and grain, and

an economy kept buoyant by massive overseas loans, meant that the country was one of the first to feel the blow as prices for these commodities plunged by as much as 50 per cent, and the London long-term money market cut off further credit.

But, worse still, when the loan capital dried up, Australia had to continue paying interest on the almost £600 million which the Federal and State Governments owed abroad; the more prices fell, the harder this became.

The national income shrunk by almost a third, from £640 million in 1928-29 to £460 million two years later; unemployment shot up from 11.1 per cent of the work force in 1921, to 29 per cent by 1932; budget deficits grew bigger and bigger; loss of confidence in the economy bred even greater business paralysis; political unrest intensified.

But no statistics can describe the suffering of men, women, and children who were victims of an upheaval that few, if any, could even begin to understand. Jobs became harder and harder to get, until there were none at all; with no wages, rent could not be paid, nor could food, clothes, or life's necessities be bought.

All that remained for many was insanitary, home-made humpies, and a sustenance handout (in cash or in kind) from the Government, known disparagingly as 'the SUSSO'.

The unemployed soon joined in mass meetings to protest at what they saw as government inaction or, even worse, deliberate moves to deprive them of the little aid they were still receiving.

In January 1931 a protest march by more than 200 unemployed, objecting to the removal of beef from their already meagre sustenance, turned into a bloody riot on the streets of Adelaide.

Six months later violence again erupted, this time in the Sydney suburb of Newtown, where a battle took place between the Communist-backed Unemployed Workers' Movement and police, who had been called in to execute an eviction order against a tenant who had not paid his rent. Reported the *Sydney Morning Herald* in June 1931:

The most sensational eviction battle Sydney has ever known was fought between 40 policemen and 18 Communists at 143 Union-street, Newtown, yesterday morning. All the defenders were injured, some seriously, and at least 15 of the police were treated by ambulance officials.

Only one man was hit by bullets fired at the walls of the house by the police, and it is not known how the injury was inflicted...

Entrenched behind barbed wire and sandbags, the defenders rained stones weighing several pounds from the top floor of the building on to the heads of the attacking police, who were attempting to execute an eviction order.

After a desperate battle, in which iron bars, piping, rude bludgeons and chairs were used by the defenders, and batons by the police, the defenders were dragged, almost insensible, to the waiting patrol waggons...

A crowd hostile to the police, numbering many thousands, gathered in Union-street. They filled the street for a quarter of a mile on each side of

the building until squads of police drove them back about 200 yards, and police cordons were thrown across the roadway.

At times the huge crowd threatened to become out of hand. It was definitely antagonistic to the police. When constables emerged from the back of the building with their faces covered in blood, the crowd hooted and shouted insulting remarks. When one patrol waggon containing prisoners was being driven away, people standing well back in the crowd hurled stones at the police driver.

Why people were prepared to go to such desperate lengths to keep a roof over their heads — even one they did not own and for which they could not pay the rent — is made clear by the newspaper reports discussing alternative accommodation available to them. The *Australian Worker*, for example, reported in August 1930:

Parked in a bush track off French's Forest-road, Balgowlah, is a tumble-down motor car, covered with old bags and rags, which for several months was the 'home' of a family of four.

The Cotton family — husband, wife and two babies — had been forced to live there ever since they had to leave their last home because they had no money to pay the rent.

During the last few weeks of wet weather they had all suffered severe discomforts, as the rain beat through the flimsy canopy and saturated their bedclothes and other belongings. The worst of it all, as Mrs Cotton explained, was that they could not get a sunny day to dry and air the

bedclothes, so each night they had to improvise a new bed from old newspapers...

Noted the *Worker's Weekly* in February 1934'

We've lived, 400 men, women and children, in our bag humpies in this flea-infested stretch of grubby sandhills, under the rule of two governments...

This camp is one and three-quarter miles long, and scattered at random, sheltering in the lee of hillocks of sand and bushes from the southerly busters that sweep across Botany Bay, are 129 camps.

Have a look inside the shacks that look so dilapidated from the road. Bags, these walls, flour bags bummed from the baker, cut open and re-sewn into squares to fit the white-anted, second-hand timber that forms the jerry-built walls; painted with a mixture of lime and fat boiled up in salt water to make them weatherproof.

The roofs are mostly made of scrap sheets of tin rescued from the garbage tip. The floors are wet sand, smoothed out and covered with more bags. Fleas? Millions of 'em!

Although economists began talking of a reverse trend to the Depression as early as 1932, one-fifth of the workforce was still without jobs by 1934, many living in camps such as that described above.

Only by the mid-1930s did rising prices for wool and other primary exports, as well as an expanding secondary industry, begin to haul Australia out of its

economic misery. But, for many thousands, the privations of the Depression dragged on until 1939, when Adolf Hitler invaded Poland and created a desperate need for all Australia could produce-on the land, in factories, and as human fodder for the battlefield.