

## Marches and Meetings

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During the years 1928 to 1934 the Perth CBD was the site of many protests by non-union, single unemployed men. These men were protesting against the government policies that were affecting them, for a better standard of living and to keep their plight in the public eye. The majority of their protests occurred in the first two years, as effective government policies were introduced in 1930 which removed the single men from the city. The non-union unemployed used three forms of protest - marches, demonstrations and meetings and all three were influenced by the streets, public spaces and buildings where they occurred. This included the frontage to the Treasury Buildings on St George's Terrace, where the Premier had his office, several streets of inner Perth and the Perth Esplanade. The Esplanade was either a starting or finishing point for their protest marches and also served as a place where the unemployed held regular public meetings. The Esplanade, as well as the other various places and spaces of the Perth CBD, was integral to how the protests unfolded and also influenced the actions of both the unemployed, and the police who were trying to control them.

The protesters were mainly single men who were not financial members of unions; although some of their married counterparts were equally active. They were protesting for work, more sustenance, better relief, especially the quality of the food, and to abolish the preference to unionists over jobs. The State Government had a policy of giving job preferences to financial members of unions that were officially recognized by the State Government, returned soldiers, and men with dependents. The single non-union unemployed men were the very last to receive jobs.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, they protested for this policy to be abandoned, or at the very least, the opportunity to buy a union ticket with their first pay.

Of the three forms of protests undertaken by these men, demonstrations were the only ones not to use the Esplanade. Instead demonstrations were more likely to occur outside the Treasury Buildings on St George's Terrace or outside the police lock-up in Roe Street. However, the Esplanade was fundamental to both meetings and marches.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is based on my unpublished honours thesis 'Unemployed Protests in Central Perth 1928 – 1934: Analysing place and occasion' completed in 2007 at Murdoch University

<sup>2</sup> 27 March 1929, Fourth Session 13<sup>th</sup> Parliament 1929, *Western Australia Votes and Proceedings of Parliament*



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Figure 1: Treasury Building Riot, 6 March 1931

The City of Perth during the Great Depression had well defined places of protest within an area bounded by Aberdeen Street to the north, Pier Street to the east, the Swan River to the south and Milligan Street to the west. The main places which the unemployed utilized in their protests were the Treasury Buildings, Perth Esplanade, the State Labour Bureau, Perth Trades Hall and some of the streets of Perth, including Pier Street, Barrack Street and St George's Terrace.

Marching through the city centre was the key instrument that the unemployed used as a form of protest. In all there were 30 marches between 1928 and 1934.<sup>3</sup> Marches were used either to increase public awareness of the unemployed's situation or to bring their dissatisfaction to the Government's attention. Marches had well defined assembling places that did not vary much and would almost always reflect where the unemployed were at a particular time of the day, such as the Labour Bureau in Pier Street on weekday mornings where they waited for jobs to be issued or the Esplanade on Sunday afternoons to make and listen to speeches. The destinations were more varied than the assembly places, as they were the ultimate purpose of the march and reflected the current needs of the unemployed. For example if they wanted to protest about the police arresting some of their members they would march to the Roe Street lock up where they were being held.

<sup>3</sup> Julie Lunn, 'Unemployed Protests in Central Perth'

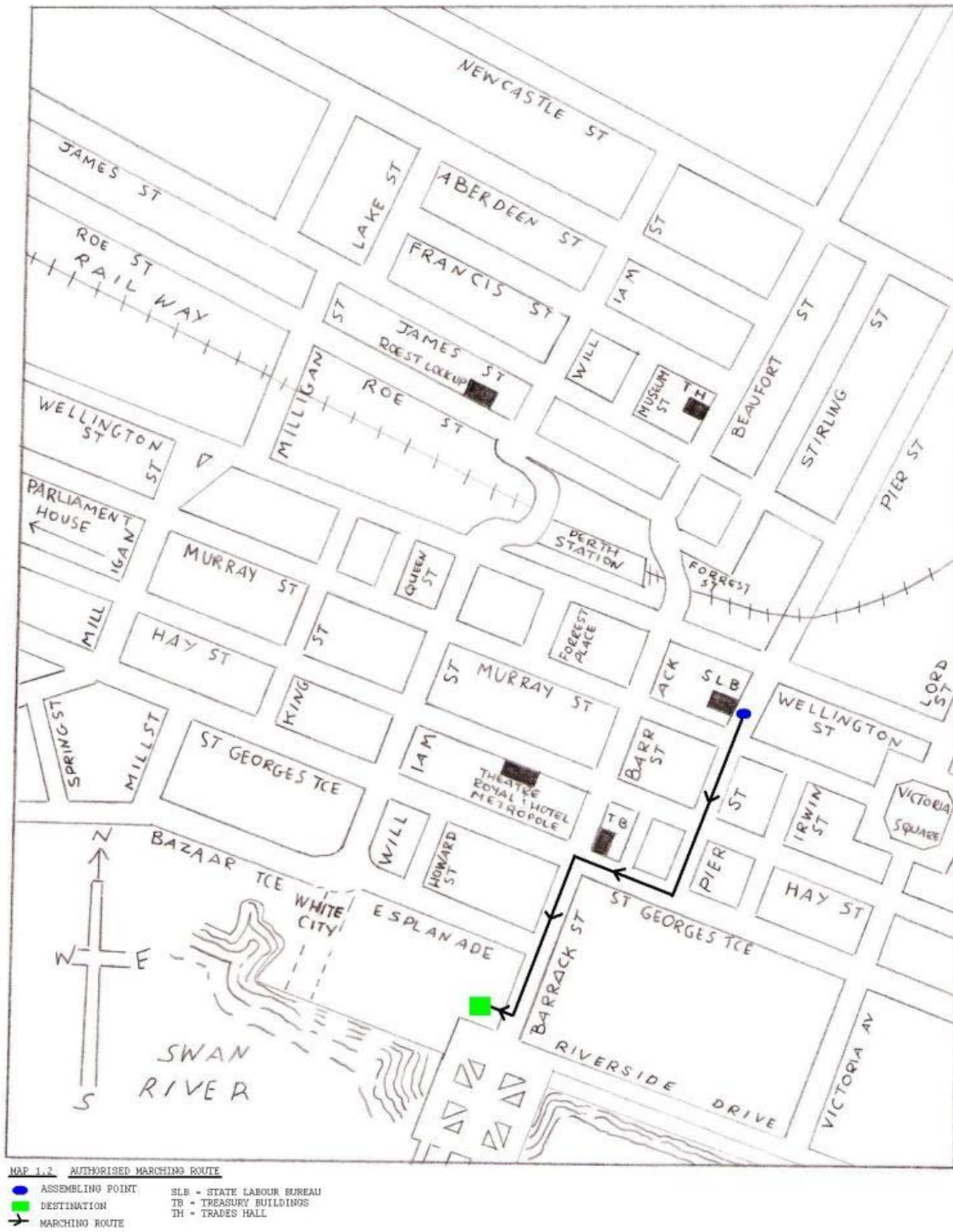


Figure 2: Authorized marching route (map drawn by author)

Marches which were intended to make the public more aware of the plight of the unemployed were concerned mainly with the route rather than the destination. However, many of these marches ended at highly visible public places such as the Esplanade. Marches

would also end on the Esplanade so that a public meeting could be held there afterwards and it was also the termination point of the authorised marching route.

Before they could march the unemployed had to first obtain the written permission of the Commissioner of Police. Once permission was granted they were allowed to march between 10.30am and 11.00am, on weekdays, along the authorised route which began at the State Labour Bureau in Pier Street. From Pier Street they marched to St. George's Terrace and then south along Barrack Street to the Esplanade. If they deviated from this route or marched without a permit they were arrested for breaching the Traffic Act and were either fined or imprisoned. In contrast the unemployed were allowed to use the Perth Esplanade as a meeting place without having to seek permission first. The police charged members of the unemployed with breaching Traffic Act 266 when they spoke at public meetings in other parts of the city.



Figure 3: Perth Esplanade, C. 1920

The Perth City Council encouraged the use of the Esplanade as a speaker's corner every Sunday afternoon, because it was easier to police than Forrest Place. The Sunday afternoon soap box provided the unemployed, and anybody else who wanted to, an opportunity to speak in public about social and political issues. The unemployed were frequent users of the Esplanade and had been holding meetings there as early as 1921. There are 51 documented meetings in public places located around the Perth CBD between 1928 and

1934, of which 43 were held on the Esplanade.<sup>4</sup> The Esplanade was the only public place within the city where they were permitted to hold meetings, as long as they remained orderly whenever they wanted to without fear of being arrested for speaking without a permit. This had been an unwritten rule for some time, however the unemployed men were officially granted permission to hold meetings on the Esplanade by the Acting Commissioner of Police in 1930, and Scaddan, the Minister for Unemployment, told a deputation on 18 January 1931 'that they could go to the Esplanade and hold orderly meetings whenever they wanted to.'<sup>5</sup> On another occasion Scaddan stated that there was "more free speech allowed on the Esplanade than anywhere else in Australia."<sup>6</sup>

As the Esplanade meetings were in public, the tone in which they were carried out was fundamental to how the unemployed wanted themselves to be perceived by the public. Generally the unemployed wanted the sympathy of the people of Perth in the hope that something would be done to improve their situation. They also wanted the public to be aware of the rough treatment they received at the hands of the police and the failure of the government to help improve their position. Therefore most of the meetings on the Esplanade were not confrontational like the marches and demonstrations and did not involve direct actions.

No one spoke at more meetings than Harry Wilkins who was known as the "Esplanade Orator."<sup>7</sup> The Western Australian Police Department referred to him as 'Wilkins the Agitator.'<sup>8</sup> Wilkins was an unemployed shoe hand, whose reputation as the "Esplanade Orator" was well deserved as he nearly always spoke at the Sunday afternoon meetings. He also spoke at private meetings in Trades Hall and led many of the marches. Wilkins spoke about a variety of subjects including communism, unemployment, the government and various members of the police, who he liked to call "scabs." However, Harry's fondness for speaking often landed him in the courts and gaol. Of the eleven arrests that occurred at Sunday afternoon meetings on the Esplanade Harry was arrested seven times.<sup>9</sup> The longest sentence he received was six months with hard labor for 'having used seditious words' regarding King George. In passing the sentence the Magistrate commented that since January 1928 Wilkins had received 'five charges of having used insulting language.'<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> *West Australian*, 19 January 1931

<sup>6</sup> *West Australian*, 31 March 1931

<sup>7</sup> *West Australian*, 6 June 1928

<sup>8</sup> Constable Griffin, Police Report, 30 November 1928, WAPD, AN 17, Acc. 430, file 1921/5047, [SROWA]

<sup>9</sup> Lunn, 'Unemployed Protests in Central Perth'

<sup>10</sup> *Daily News*, 6 November 1930

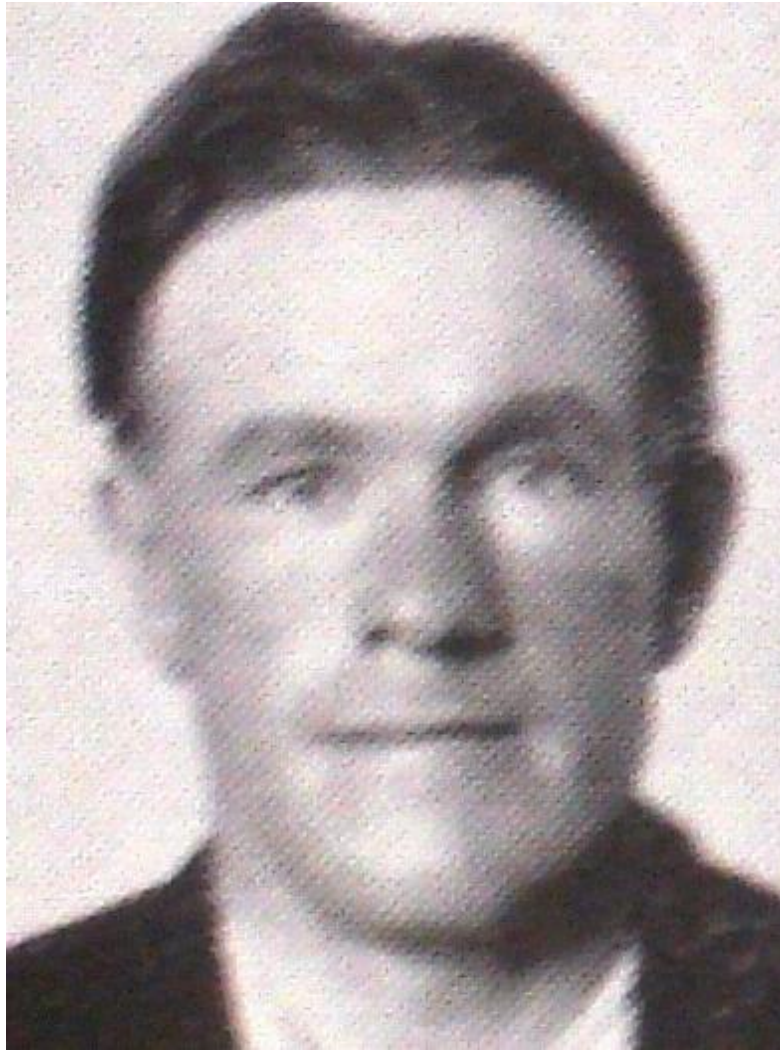


Figure 4: Harry Wilkins (photograph from WA Police Gazettes)

Harry Wilkins was charged for speaking on the Esplanade without written permission in 1933. During his court case in February 1934 Wilkins said that he had

been speaking on the Esplanade for seven years, and had never had a permit. He had never been asked about it until last year, when he was charged in December and warned by the Magistrate not to address meetings without permission.<sup>11</sup>

Wilkins said that he had applied for a permit to speak from the Commissioner of Police but had been denied. He did not appeal against this decision 'because he had thought that the dice were loaded against him.'<sup>12</sup> This marked an abrupt change in the relationship that the

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<sup>11</sup> *West Australian*, 1 February 1934

<sup>12</sup> *West Australian*, 1 February 1934

unemployed had enjoyed with the Esplanade as a place where they could speak freely, as long as they were orderly, without police interference. Harry's wife Violet also addressed many unemployed meetings in Perth.



Figure 5: Violet Wilkins (photograph from WA Police Gazettes)

Violet was a formidable woman who only had one arm which she used with great effect as she was prone to hitting people over the head with her handbag if she did not agree with what they said. She was a regular at the Sunday afternoon meetings on the Esplanade, although she did not always speak. She was arrested on the 28 September 1930 for hindering the police in the execution of their duty, while they were trying to arrest her husband for using insulting language in his speech.<sup>13</sup> Violet was also arrested, on 4 September 1934, for addressing a meeting in Forrest Place and she was an active participant in marches and during the Treasury Building Riot. Not all of her efforts at addressing the unemployed were successful. On 11 June 1934 at a meeting on the Esplanade Violet

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<sup>13</sup> *Daily News*, 29 September 1930 and *West Australian*, 30 September 1930

'mounted the platform, and tried to urge the men to direct action, but no attention whatever was paid to her.'<sup>14</sup>

The police had to use various strategies to police the unemployed meetings depending on whether it was a public or private meeting. The unemployed meetings on the Esplanade always had an officer on duty who would listen 'to speeches made by members and workless of the unemployed movement.'<sup>15</sup> The officers would record details of who spoke, how long the meeting was, how many unemployed were in attendance, if they were orderly and if any 'inflammatory utterances [were] made.'<sup>16</sup> Plainclothes policemen would on occasion mingle with the crowd on the Esplanade and at the State Labour Bureau. However, the unemployed were usually aware of their presence and Harry Wilkins was always quick to point them out in his speeches on the Esplanade.

The only time there was a substantial police presence on the Esplanade was at the meeting held directly after the Frankland River demonstration. The unemployed had congregated to discuss 'the incidents of the previous hour,' and consequently, speaker after speaker mounted a platform and criticized the police. Shortly after 2 pm '60 uniformed police marched on to the Esplanade in columns of four' and were hooted by the crowd. The police fell into single line and partly surrounded the crowd, which numbered three or four thousand people. By surrounding the rear of the crowd the police had hoped to effectively contain any disturbances that were likely to occur as a result of the police arresting speakers, 'who it was considered had gone too far in their criticism of the force.' The police arrested four men and remained on the Esplanade until 3.30 pm 'when they once more formed into fours and amidst further hooting and jeers marched back to the central police station.'<sup>17</sup>

Unemployed meetings on the Esplanade were also held to gain the sympathy of the public. On 21 February 1930 the unemployed held a meeting with the intention of showing 'the distress existing among the unemployed.' They did this by holding the meeting at the same time as the men who were 'absolutely destitute' received their daily ration of half a jam tin of soup and a piece of dried bread.'<sup>18</sup> Although the unemployed wanted the sympathy of the public, they did so in the hope that it would put pressure on the government to change their situation. Consequently, the unemployed 'stressed the point that they wanted work and not charity.'<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Inspector Notley, police report, 11 June 1934, WAPD, AN 17, Acc 430, file 1921/5047, [SROWA]

<sup>15</sup> Constable Secourable, police report, 1 June 1928, WAPD, AN 17, Acc 430, file 1921/5047, [SROWA]

<sup>16</sup> Brodie, police report, 1 July 1928, WAPD, AN 17, Acc 430, file 1921/5047, [SROWA]

<sup>17</sup> *West Australian*, 13 September 1932

<sup>18</sup> *Daily News*, 21 February 1930

<sup>19</sup> *Daily News*, 26 July 1928

For some of the single unemployed men the Esplanade was much more than a meeting place, as many were forced to camp there during the early years of the Depression. On 9 April 1929, the *Daily News* reported that up to 120 men had slept on the Esplanade the previous night, as they had nowhere else to go, and up to 150 to 170 men went there to obtain a meal.<sup>20</sup> These men were forced to rely on the public for food. Collections from people from the suburbs were taken up at the Sunday meetings on the Esplanade as well as during the week. These collections provide the men with their evening meal, which usually consisted of tea and a slice of bread. The Housewives Association provided 25 men with a substantial breakfast each day in their rooms on Barrack Street and on Sundays they catered for 80 men. The men were subjected to police harassment for vagrancy and were exposed to the extremes of the weather. They would often return to the Esplanade in wet weather to find it flooded and the *West Australian* reported that ninety per cent of the men had 'no blankets, having sold them to buy food.'<sup>21</sup> The unemployed stopped using the Esplanade as living space in June 1930 when the Mitchell government introduced the policy of removing the single men to camps in the country.

For the unemployed protesters of the Great Depression the Esplanade represented a space within the city which they could lawfully use for protesting against their situation and the government policies that were affecting them, as long as they remained orderly, as well as keeping their plight in the public eye. It was the one place in the CBD they could claim as their own. It was only when Harry Wilkins was arrested for speaking there without permission, after having done so for seven years that this relationship changed. The Esplanade was an integral part of their protests and highlights the importance of the interconnections of place with protest and how this is fundamental in providing a full understanding of the unemployed protests of the Great Depression. These sites of protest deserve to be remembered as do the men and women who were connected to them through their protests.

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<sup>20</sup> *Daily News*, 9 April 1929

<sup>21</sup> *West Australian*, 27 May 1929

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