The Government Railway Workshops at Midland had few lengthy industrial disputes during its 90 years of existence, yet despite this apparently calm exterior, it was a highly contested site, divided not only into ‘blue’ and ‘white-collar’ territories – or ‘works’ and ‘management’ – but within those broad demarcations into the territory of particular trades, between whom a lively rivalry flourished. Yet of all these places, the two that most excite the memory of past employees and catch the imagination of visitors to the site a decade after the closure of the Workshops are the flagpole and ‘Red Square’. This paper discusses the various roles of ‘Red Square’ as a site for the propagation and spreading of political ideas, a symbol of workers’ defiance against the Workshops ‘hierarchy’ and a site for myth making. It concludes with a consideration of how areas such as ‘Red Square’ might be interpreted and maintained in any significant way in the process of re-developing the site.

‘Red Square’ – the historical background
In 2004, no physical remnant of ‘Red Square’ – or ‘Red Alley’ as it was also called – remained, except empty floor space in the Machine Shop section of Block 3, where once stood a double row of fourteen lathes. During the 1950s, Jack Marks, a Fitter and Turner who was an active member of the Communist Party of Australia (CPA), operated the third of the heavy Dean and Grace lathes, under the gaze of the shop foreman. In the lunch break, Marks reputedly would ‘proselytise’ his fellow workers but, as a shop steward for the Amalgamated Engineering Union (AEU), he also addressed their grievances. Elsewhere, I have argued that this – rather than his radical philosophy – contributed to his popularity among the workforce. Although a small minority among the 2500-strong workforce at Midland in the 1950s, the Communists were an active group, who produced their own newspaper on a roughly monthly basis. Many went on to careers as union organisers outside of the Workshops, and their influence became widespread around the state. An example was Rod Quinn, an apprentice Car and Wagon Builder from 1951-56, who regarded the Workshops as ‘a university within which I developed the self-confidence to “have an opinion”.’ According to Quinn:

The Workshops … employ[ed] many politically concerned and active people operating within the peculiarities of fifties cold-war politics. Among the politically-minded in the workforce there were many activists mature enough to play an effective role defending workers’ interests and to encourage the development of political awareness. Their example was to provide a positive influence on my later activities as a shop steward, an activist in the building industry and a trade union trainer.

As Stuart Macintyre has shown elsewhere in this issue, between the Party’s formation in 1920 and the beginning of the Second World War in 1939, Communists
in Western Australia had an especially difficult time in this ‘large, isolated, sparsely settled State … dominated by craft unions and the large, powerful and undemocratic Australian Workers’ Union’ [AWU].

Furthermore, the unique Westralian organisation wherein the ALP controlled both the political and industrial wings of the labour movement and, for several decades, resisted the formation of an independent Trades and Labor Council (TLC), denied non-ALP unionists a voice in the State’s industrial councils and effectively discriminated against unions with Communist officials.

After the Second World War, the numerical increase – and the corresponding increase in influence – of several militant unions (for example, the AEU, the Collie Miners and the WWF); the decline of the conservative AWU, and the State ALP’s loss of government in 1947 were significant factors leading to the eventual formation of an independent TLC in 1963.

Union activists tended to be associated with the State’s few heavy manufacturing, mining or transport industries, located on the Goldfields, the wharves or the Collie coalfields, or at the Midland Railway Workshops. While Western Australia lacked massive industrial conurbations such as Wollongong and the Illawarra region, the Goldfields and the Fremantle Wharves, in particular, were early ‘hot beds’ of militancy. Victorians Don Cameron and Philip Collier both became labour activists while on the Goldfields, although Collier abandoned most of his militancy after becoming Premier in 1924.

Red Square as a site for spreading propaganda and ideas

In this context, the achievements of a ‘small cell’ of communist workers within the State’s largest industrial workplace may have been vested with a greater significance. ‘Red Square’ became the physical focus of this group, although there were other gathering places around the site. Partly because of the State’s small population and the even smaller population of union activists, strong links developed between the sites mentioned above, as activists moved from one to another. Changes to goldmining technology in the 1930s, for example, drove a number of skilled tradesmen to seek work in Midland and on the Fremantle wharves. Ted Zeffert, who was employed at the Workshops for about three years, and Jack Coleman, who became a shop steward for the WA Association of Railway Employees (WAASRE) in the Boiler Shop were both from Goldfields families; Jack was ‘a second generation communist’. According to Zeffert, Bill Stronach, a WAASRE shop steward in the Fitting Shop before the Second World War, who later became President of the Joint Unions Committee, had a similarly militant background ‘in the sustenance work camps in the goldfields region’. Furthermore, Zeffert believed that these men ‘were not isolated cases’. While distributing the communist paper, the Tribune, around the Workshops, as well as in his work – which took him into each of the three main blocks – he met many Goldfields men, most of whom were tough, cool-headed, industrially-militant individuals, used to working in dangerous conditions.

Owen Salmon, who regularly visited the Workshops in his role as State Organiser for the Electrical Trades Union (ETU), commented that there was ‘virtually a communist cell’ at Midland; the men involved included Marks, Coleman, Dennis Day and others who were veterans of the unsuccessful six-month metal workers’ strike that occurred in 1952.

According to Neil McDougall, who began his apprenticeship nine years later, the strike was ‘still bitterly remembered, and every tradesman would unfailingly tell you as an apprentice which blokes had been black legs during the strike’. The Australasian Society of Engineers (ASE) and the
Moulders’ Union both refused to take part in the strike because their officers felt it was Communist-inspired. Some workers claimed that the ASE’s membership largely comprised members of the Catholic Action Movement and was influenced by the Democratic Labor Party (DLP).\textsuperscript{xv}

The communists, on the other hand, were seen as being veterans of the 1952 dispute.\textsuperscript{xvi} They continued to work for improvements in this ‘Dickensian’ workplace, so that, despite the blame attached to them for losing the strike, they gained reputations as committed fighters for improved conditions. They were very active in the Joint Unions Committee, a body that coordinated responses to issues affecting more than one union at the Workshops.\textsuperscript{xvii} Consequently, men would gather in a convenient spot in their Workshop during the lunch break to discuss any grievances with their shop steward. ‘Red Square’ was one such spot, although Marks’ lathe was superseded as a gathering place once he departed from the Workshops. Day mentioned gathering at the marking off table at the opposite end of the lathes from the foreman’s office.\textsuperscript{xviii}

Some workers, such as Rod Quinn, came to listen and absorb political ideas. The dedicated Communists, therefore, appear to have impressed because they were committed unionists who, as shop stewards worked hard to obtain better pay and conditions for their fellow workers, and in some cases, they had considerable personal skills of oratory, persuasion and humour. But they also earned respect as excellent tradesmen. According to Jack Coleman, ‘wherever there were communists in industry they were never criticised for their work. They were not loafers and were very honest people in that regard’.\textsuperscript{xix} Coleman’s son, Bill, recalled that workers used to come to Jack with ‘their personal problems [and] he helped them as much as he
could as well as carrying on Party and trade union work. He gave a lot of himself to other people, sometimes to the detriment of his own family…”

Election results are an indicator of ambivalent attitudes towards communists. In union politics, Marks was elected repeatedly to the AEU executive and was Branch President in the early 1960s. He was shop stewards convenor at Midland Workshops, represented staff on the Punishments Appeal Board, and was the Metal Trades Federal delegate. But, it would appear, people were less willing to have him represent them in Parliament. Marks and other prominent communists – such as Joan Williams and John Rivo Gandini – stood for the House of Representatives and the Senate during various election campaigns in the 1950s and ‘60s but none came close to victory. According to Unity, the Communist vote increased in the Federal electorate of Swan from 493 in 1959 to 801 in 1962, indicating a considerable increase in support – but which sections of the electorate voted for communists is unknown. The residences of the Workshops workforce were widely scattered, and it would be impossible to ascertain their impact on the vote. Even the ‘Communist program for Midland Workshops’, advertised in Unity just prior to the December 1961 Federal election, did not guarantee success. The program promised more jobs by expanding and modernising the railway system, including electrification of the metropolitan rail service; gaining more overseas contracts for the Workshops; improving amenities for workers, and increasing margins.

Some workers felt that if Marks had joined the ALP, instead of the CPA, he would have soon become a Member of Parliament because ‘he could talk people into anything’.

Although there were DLP members among the Workshops employees, and some may have held roles in the executives of more conservative unions, such as the Moulders, the ASE or the WAASRE, the DLP in Western Australia never developed a union base. Indeed, Unity rarely mentioned the DLP or ‘groupers’, although an article in the March 1955 issue attacked ‘Industrial Groups’, declaring that it was not a ‘sectarian’ issue but rather than employers used the groups to weaken and pacify the labour movement, and accusing ALP State President and WAASRE member C.A. Gough – along with Tom Burke, Kim Beazley and other ALP members – as being ‘main grouper mouthpieces’. This may indicate that the DLP presence at Midland was insufficient to warrant further mention. Certainly, some workers expressed strong anti-Communist views.

The activities of Red Square were closely linked with the public space around the flagpole in front of Block 1 (the Carriage Shop and Wood Mill). Originally built in 1916 as a memorial to Workshops employees who died in the First World War, the flagpole was relocated to its present day site in 1924, prior to the erection of the Peace Memorial. It soon became a focus for workers’ gatherings when there were grievances to address, as well as a forum for parliamentarians, political candidates and other public figures wishing to address the assembled workforce.

Although all flagpole meetings had to receive the Works Manager’s prior permission, management even permitted the use of a loud speaker and allowed an electrical tradesman employed at the Workshops to set up the platform and amplification system in work time. By sanctioning properly organised flagpole meetings, management provided the workers with a means of ‘letting off steam’ and airing legitimate industrial grievances, but they also provided a platform for
Communists. A survey of *Unity* issues from the 1950s and ‘60s\(^{xxvi}\) indicates that Communist candidates for State and Federal elections – as well as those representing the major political parties – spoke on a number of occasions at Flagpole meetings. Examples include Jack Marks and Paddy Troy, candidates for the Senate, addressing workers on 5 December 1961, and a meeting for ‘Communist candidates’ on 11 February 1965. According to Jack Coleman, at some point in the 1940s or 1950s, management banned flagpole meetings. After the intervention of the Minister for Railways in the Labor administration, Bert Styants, the ban was revoked, except for the stipulation that candidates speaking on behalf of political parties could address the workers only at election time.\(^{xxvii}\)

Marks, in particular, was popular as a flagpole speaker. According to Coleman:

> There would be a flagpole meeting on … and people would ask if Marksy was speaking. He would come back from deputations over at the main office, which he called ‘bullshit castle’, and say things like: ‘Well apart from an aching anus, I got nothing!’ It appealed to the blokes.\(^{xxviii}\)

Many past employees of the Workshops had memories of Marks. Phillip Bristow Stagg, a Turner and Iron Machinist, recalled that Marks was very persuasive and had got him ‘involved’ in the AEU.\(^{xxix}\) Patrick Gayton, a Pattern Maker, regarded Marks as ‘a great orator’ who ‘could talk us into anything really. He was funny, he used to [say]… “have you seen the daily sausage wrapper today?” [meaning] … the *West Australian*, of course’.\(^{xxx}\) Even Ron Wadham, (Works Manager, 1978-89) regarded Marks as:

> … a remarkable character … a fine controller of men and a persuasive speaker. He would stand at Flagpole meetings and point towards the Management buildings and decry the exploitation of the workers and pronounce the ineptitude of the Manager’.\(^{xxxi}\)

Wadham’s comments seem to suggest that there was more wind than substance to Marks’ fulminations – almost as if this were a game that had to be enacted between workers and management in order for each to retain their credibility.

Thus ‘Red Square’ and the flagpole – epitomising workers’ struggle in the face of unyielding or unsympathetic management – became spaces with several uses or layers of meaning. In the case of the former, there was the industrial purpose for which the lathes had been placed there and the socio-political purpose invested by the communists and other union activists who worked the lathes and used the space between them as a gathering point in lunch hours. ‘Red Square’ gained its own mythology; long after Marks had left, new employees ‘recalled’ what went on there.

### Red Square as a symbol of worker resistance

In order to understand the full significance of the bravado explicit in workers meeting in ‘Red Square’ to discuss grievances literally under the foreman’s eye, we need to appreciate the attitudes of shop floor workers to their immediate superiors and fellow tradesmen – the sub foremen and foremen. Neil McDougall, who began his apprenticeship in the Fitting Shop in April 1961, said of his first day at the Workshops:
the foreman … in those days was a little tin god, who had his office up above everyone … Foremen generally didn’t become foremen until they were in their mid fifties, and [they] worked until 65, so they were at the end of their career, but they were generally selected on the basis of proven management and trade skills … When you climbed the steps to that office, and there was the foreman and his clerk, … you were then under the control of the foreman.\textsuperscript{xxii}

According to Dave Hicks, a Fitter and Turner who worked in the ‘Red Square’ area during the 1970s, and who later became an organiser for the AMWU:

> The senior foreman’s office was always an elevated office. You had to walk upstairs … [H]e would be elevated and he could see right down each end of the [Machine] shop; he could stand in his window and watch what’s happening. And the clerk would always be up there. So if you wanted to get out of the joint, if you needed to go to the doctor or you were feeling sick, you would have to go up to the clerk and ask for a pass, a leave pass. It was like a jail. The control they exercised in that place was absolute.\textsuperscript{xxxiii}

Elsewhere, Hicks referred to the foreman as being ‘nothing more than a policeman, trying to catch people out doing things wrong and tell them off’ … It was very authoritarian…\textsuperscript{xxxiv} In all of these descriptions, there are strong connotations of foreman’s power, increased by his elevated location and the need to climb stairs to see him, and the workers’ powerlessness – the feeling of always being under scrutiny and of being dependent upon the foreman’s good grace. The foreman had absolute control over workers’ freedom to move around the shop. Alan Bright, a car and wagon builder, commented that, ‘You weren’t supposed to leave your shop unless you had a reason. The foreman would demand to know what you were doing. Tradesmen had no excuse, whereas apprentices could get away with it’. Bright also expressed cynicism about why particular employees were promoted to sub-foreman and foreman:

> The major problem with the Workshops was that the people running them had less ability and knowledge than the people doing the job. If you were a nasty person and weren’t a very good tradesman, they thought, ‘We can make a boss out of you’. But if you were skilled and fast, ‘We can’t afford to have you a boss. I’m sorry you have to work on that production line to get these wagons out really fast’.\textsuperscript{xxxv}

Evidence suggests that, whether or not they were elite tradesmen, foremen were certainly very experienced in their trade. In 1940, when Jack Emery began his apprenticeship, both Jimmy Yule and his successor, Leo McNamara – Machine Shop foremen in the 1950s and 1960s – were operating huge milling machines. Emery mentioned that both were soon promoted to ‘leading hand, one rank below sub-foreman’. Prior to arriving at the Workshops, McNamara had been an aircraft engineer \textsuperscript{xxxvi} Emery and other workers held a kindlier view of foremen and sub-foremen than some quoted above, with Jack Coleman commenting that ‘most foremen were good’ and ‘would respect you’.\textsuperscript{xxxvii} Frank Bastow spoke of the sub-foreman being ‘one of the mob. We had no trouble with him. He had a little bit of authority of course, naturally, and at times I suppose he had to use that authority on you…’ \textsuperscript{xxxviii} The reality was, of course, that the foreman could never be ‘one of the mob’ because it was his job to make his workshop function as efficiently as possible and to report regularly to the management on such matters as output and performance of men and machines, accidents, industrial disturbances and any other factors that influenced work productivity.\textsuperscript{xxxix}
Foremen were the link between tradesmen and professional staff at the Workshops. In this pre-World War II photograph, foremen and management pose as a group.

Above the foremen was the management hierarchy. On the factory floor, the foreman was merely the ever-present reminder of this autocratic system. Several employees who contributed to the Midland Railway Workshops History project commented on the ‘them and us’ culture existing between management and shop floor. From the management point of view, Works Manager Ron Wadham commented somewhat cynically:

Managers are appointed to screw the workers. Trade unions were formed to screw the Management. In between is a grey area where a working compromise is achieved. The Railway Workshops were a natural battleground. Management work[ed] within general guidelines and trade unions [took] what action they could to test the limits of management’s discretionary powers to gain better conditions for their members.

Dave Hicks, similarly, saw a gulf between clerical workers and factory workers, to the extent that ‘the junior office worker’ could give ‘a mature tradesman’ a difficult time if he went to the CME’s office to inquire about a discrepancy in his pay. Conversely, clerical workers ‘straying’ onto the factory floor could find their white shirts pelted with red soil. While some of these actions might seem at worst petty and at best a bit of harmless fun, they appear to have left a deep impression upon Workshops employees. Furthermore, some commented that the ‘them and us’ culture intensified over time, especially in the last few years before the closure. In the environment of increasing powerless and decreasing workforce that prevailed during the Workshops’ last years, perhaps it is not surprising that ‘Red Square’ should come to personify the Workshops’ glory days when unionists stood up to ‘bullshit castle’.

Interpreting Red Square
Since the closure of the Workshops in 1994, and the subsequent redevelopment and interpretation of the site, ‘Red Square/Alley’ has featured on heritage walks, with ex-
employee guides delighting in pointing out the proximity of the ‘alley’ to the foreman’s office.\textsuperscript{xlv} There seems little doubt that – for many past employees – ‘Red Square’ and the flagpole loom large in the memory. Consequently, a re-development of the Workshops site, aiming to value and conserve the history and heritage of the place, of necessity must resolve the dilemma of how to interpret places with a ‘story’ but little remaining physical fabric.

In a public address at Midland in 2001 historian Dr Lucy Taksa, of the University of NSW, listed a number of recommendations for establishing a successful heritage centre at the Workshops. These included the active involvement of members of the community, particularly those who once worked at the site, and the visible presence of such people in the site’s redevelopment and reuse.\textsuperscript{xlv} The importance of collaboration between the past and present occupants of the site, along with history, heritage and architecture professionals, cannot be over-stressed in a project that requires strong community support. Past employees brought to the Midland Railway Workshops History Project not only an impressive range of skills and knowledge about process and machinery at the Workshops, but a fund of stories that re-created the human dimension of working there. Interpreting that ‘human dimension’ in spaces where the physical fabric – the lathes and the marking-out tables, for example – has been removed, requires creatively designed solutions which could incorporate interpretation panels, and displays involving reconstructions or original machines. Whatever is ultimately decided upon must attract and inform the public, without either detracting from the re-developed interior of the Machine Shop or standing in un-contextualised isolation.

‘Red Square’ in isolation (however creatively it may have been re-interpreted) means very little; surrounded by buildings and objects which still retain evidence of their original use, it has significance. The \textit{Heritage Strategy} (2001) states that:

- all site features of exceptional significance and considerable significance [should] be retained and preserved, and
- areas of exceptional or considerable significance should be retained as open space.\textsuperscript{xlvi}

It should be possible to walk through the re-developed site and recognise the former use of the buildings, with the ‘streetscape’ retaining an authentic industrial past. Most importantly, the site’s stories must be preserved and re-told in the public domain, so that they remain evident in the fabric and purposes of the site. Otherwise, the Workshops site will be nothing more than an empty industrial shell with no human dimension – a glossy and sanitized version of the past that omits the powerful struggles and victories symbolised by Red Square.

\begin{itemize}
  \item Bobbie Oliver is Senior Lecturer in History at Curtin University. The author wishes to Andrew Gill and Stella Files for their comments on an earlier draft of this paper.
  \item For example, foundry worker Fred Cadwallader described the rivalry between workers in the Foundry and the Boiler Shop. Interview with Ric McCracken, 2 July 2002.
  \item B. Oliver, ‘Shades of the Cold War. Battles of Space and Place at the Midland Railway Workshops’, a paper submitted to the ASSLH 2005 Biennial Conference in Sydney.
  \item All copies of \textit{Unity} cited in this paper are held in Annette & Duncan Cameron’s Papers, Battye Library of WA History, MN 1504, Accession No. 4765A, Box 18, item 20. \textit{Unity} was
\end{itemize}
produced on a more or less monthly basis (sometimes more frequently) from at least 1956 until 1968. No earlier or later copies have been sighted.

v Examples are Jack Marks, Dennis Day, Rod Quinn and Jack Coleman.


vii S. Macintyre [will require full reference during editing process]


xi B. Oliver, War and Peace in Western Australia. The social and political impact of the Great War, 1914-1926, UWA Press, Nedlands, 1995, p. 50.

xii Ted Zeffert, letter to Ric McCracken, 22 May 2001, Midland Railway Workshops History collection, yet to be accessioned by Battye Library.


xv Ibid.

xvi Dennis Day to Ric McCracken, 3 March 2003, Midland Railway Workshops History Project, Battye Library, un-accessioned at time of writing.

xvii Dennis Day to Ric McCracken, n.d. Midland Railway Workshops History Project, Battye Library, un-accessioned at time of writing.

xviii Jack Coleman, cited in Read, Marksy, p. 61.

xix Bill Coleman, speaking at the ASSLH Seminar on the CPA (WA), 30 June 2001, see elsewhere in this issue of Papers in Labour History.

xx Unity, 5 December 1961

xxi For example, Philip Bristow-Stagg, interviewed by Richard Noyelle for the Midland Railway Workshops History Project, 25 March 2004.

xxii Oliver, Unity is Strength, p. 230.

xxiii Unity, 29 March 1955.

xxiv At least one anti-Communist leaflet was circulated in the Workshops. Signed by ‘F. Hrubos’, it accused the Communists of being ‘cripplers of the prosperity of Australia’ who did not have ‘the interests of Australia at heart, so they should take the “A” out of CPA’, nd, possibly 1959, in Cameron Papers, Box 18, item 20. Leo McNamara, Machine Shop Foreman from the late 1950s until the 1970s, was described as ‘hating Communists’. See Day to McCracken, nd.

xxv Unity issues in A. & D Cameron Papers, Battye Library Accession No. 4765A (MN 1504), Box 18, item 20. All the issues of Unity cited in this paper are from this collection.

xxvi Jack Coleman, cited in Read, Marksy, p. 63.

xxvii Cited in Read, Marksy, p. 61.

xxviii Bristow-Stagg, interview, op. cit.


xxxii Dave Hicks, interviewed by Katina Devril, 17 September 2003, for the Midland Railway Workshops History Project.
xxxiv Dave Hicks, interviewed by Julie Rogers, 24 April 2002.
xxxv Alan Bright, car & wagon builder, interviewed by Katina Devril, 14 September 2003.
xxxvii Jack Coleman, interviewed by Stuart Reid, 19 September 1988, Battye Library Accession No. OH 2062.
xxxviii Frank Bastow, interviewed by Bobbie Oliver, 8 November 2000.
xxxix See, for example, WAGR collection in SROWA, WAS1403, CONS no. 5267, item 1961/2841A o2v, Annual Reports of Foreman Turner, 1946-76.
xli Dave Hicks, interviewed by Katina Devril, 17 September 2003.
xlii Experience of Kevin Mountain, who worked as a clerk, related to the author during a tour of the Workshops, 1998.
xliii See, for example, Graeme Bywater, interviewed by Nancy McKenzie, 17 December 2004, for the Midland
xliv The author was present at a number of these occasions between 1999 and 2004.