

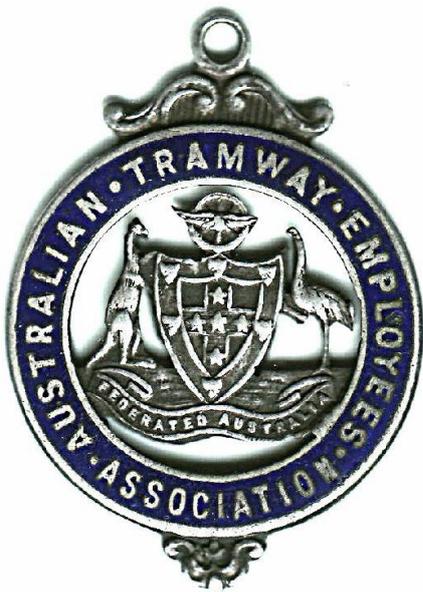
The Australian Tramway Employees Strike in January 1912

On the 18th January 1912 at 11am members of the Australian Tramway Employees' Association (Brisbane Branch) (ATEA) attached their union badges to their watch-chains in a public display of their Union loyalty. This was in defiance of a rule of the British-owned Brisbane Tramway Company of which Mr Joseph Stillman Badger (an American) was the manager. The Brisbane Tramway Company was responsible for running and maintaining the Brisbane Tramway System which supplied public transport to the city of Brisbane and its surrounding suburbs.



A typical scene of Brisbane trams from around the era of the 1912 strike. This view is looking at the Queen Street Eagle Street intersection.

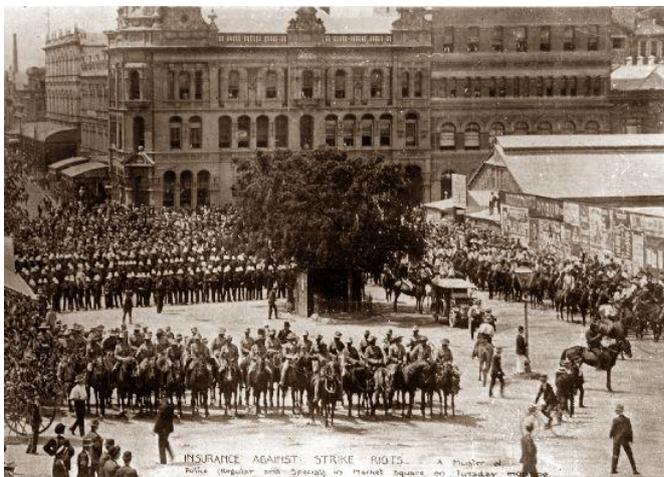
The Union Badges had arrived in Queensland on 15th January, and on 17th January a meeting of the ATEA at the Trades Hall decided that their members would don their Union badge the following morning in defiance of a Company Order against such wearing of badges. On the morning of 18 January at 11 am a crowd of considerable size gathered at the General Post Office in Brisbane and watched the tramway men attach the union badges to their watch chains.



Reaction came swift and fast with the company announcing that the men who persisted in wearing the union badge would be stood down. Thus on Thursday 18 January all men who came in with their tramcars to the Company's yard at Countess Street displaying the union badge were promptly suspended and all those wearing the union badge who came in to take the tramcars out were refused. At 3pm on the same day a deputation of tramway employee unionists met with the manager and was told that work would be available for them if they attended without their badge. The men replied that they insisted on wearing their badges at which a crowd nearby cheered lustily.

The beginning of the tramway strike saw a steadfastness by each side and a unwillingness to give way on any matter. For the tramway company there appeared to be no grounds for the dispute. The union badges were not to be worn in accordance with company regulation. The Brisbane Courier (the newspaper at the time) regarded "the wearing of such a badge at any time as a comparatively trifling matter".

The inability of the two parties to compromise over the following days, and with the Brisbane Tramway Company advertising to fill the vacancies for the men on strike led to the forming of a Strike Committee which ended up involving 43 unions across Queensland - calling a general strike on 30th January. This led to nightly meetings of union supporters in several locations across Brisbane involving thousands of people. From the 31st January Brisbane shops and hotels closed down, bread deliveries stopped. Newspapers were printed with minimal print and train services ceased at night.



A scene of police and unionists in Market Square. The square was situated where the City Hall is now. Originally Albert Street ran from Alice Street to Ann Street ending near the old Brisbane Markets that used to be in Roma Street. Market Square occupied the land between Ann Street and Adelaide Street on the river side of Albert Street. The square was lost when construction on the City Hall began in 1920.



Another scene of police and unionists in Market Square.

All this led to the fateful day of 2nd February which is known in history as Black Friday. On this day the Commissioner of Police refused to allow the unionists to march in Brisbane streets. By 10am on 2nd February a large crowd of unionists gathered in the city and these men (and women and children) marching were dispersed by the police at several locations around Brisbane by the use of batons. The police were supported by several thousand special constables who were sworn in to assist the police in maintaining law and order. These special

constables came from outside Brisbane and within the State Government. During the morning several unionists including females and police officers were injured in scuffles.

The enrolment of mounted police and special constables to quell the unrest backfired with violence erupting on 'Black Friday', 2 February 1912. The strike lasted a total of five weeks with Premier Denham resorting to requesting intervention from the army.

One of the most significant actions at the time occurred during a march on Parliament House: Emma Miller, a women's rights and labour activist in her seventies, stuck a hatpin into the horse ridden by the Police Commissioner, causing him to be thrown to the ground and injured.

The enthusiasm for the strike started to peter out after Black Friday, with the shops and hotels re-opening to the public in the following week. Because of lack of support from the southern states' union branches, men started to return to work with most unions returning to work by the end of February.

On the 27th February the Arbitration Commission granted the rights to the Union to wear their badge at work. This was only a small win for the Union as the Company refused to accept back any of the employees who were involved in the strike. The men who were involved in the strike were only re-employed in 1924 after the Tramway System was taken over by the Government.

BRISBANE TRAMWAY COMPANY EMPLOYEE TICKET



This employee ticket was issued by the Brisbane Tramway Company to Cosmo Williamson on the 16th January 1912. He used two of the tickets for traveling to work on the 17th and 18th of January and was stood down on the 18th for wearing his union badge. This ticket is still in the possession of his family.

The Brisbane Tramway Museum Society
ACN 009 793 604