

The GREAT STRIKE 1917



A story involving murder, censorship and political manipulation which lay dormant in archival vaults for decades. It was Sydney, 1917 and to this day, Australia's largest industrial upheaval.

<http://www.metromagazine.com.au>

<https://theeducationshop.com.au>

© ATOM 2020 ISBN: 978-1-76061-357-0

ATOM
AUSTRALIAN TEACHERS OF MEDIA

A STUDY GUIDE BY
ROBERT LEWIS



Overview

The Great Strike 1917 (Amanda King, 2019) is a 70-minute documentary film about the largely forgotten most serious industrial upheaval that occurred at home in Australia during World War 1.

Thousands of men and women stopped work; the State Government recruited volunteers to break the strike, allowing some to carry weapons; trade unions were deregistered and some of their leaders were charged with criminal offences. It was a time of violent emotions and government and police action against workers, their families and supporters, as well as individual acts of violence by and against strikers. A striker was shot and killed. A filmmaker had his film censored and embargoed. It was Sydney, 1917.

The stoppage became the biggest and most long-lasting industrial upheaval Australia had seen or has seen since. At its height the strike stopped coastal shipping, mining, the handling of cargo on wharves, and transport. It involved nearly one hundred thousand workers in Australia's eastern states, and thousands more sympathisers.

Despite being a crushing defeat at the time for the strikers, it had lasting consequences for the Australian labour movement.

It was over 100 years ago, but personal stories rarely spoken about still filter through, illustrating the trauma as well as some positive legacies of the event, which still strongly resonate today.

The Great Strike 1917 helps us explore several big questions in history:

- What does the strike tell us about Australians during war-time?
- What happens to individuals and to society when a nation is divided during a national event?
- What happens when people have conflicting ideas about citizens right and appropriate patriotic duties?
- How can we remember and commemorate significant events in our past that reflect major social conflicts?



CONTENT HYPERLINKS

3 CURRICULUM APPLICABILITY
4 BEFORE WATCHING THE FILM

7 EXPLORING IDEAS AND ISSUES IN THE FILM
11 BRINGING IT TOGETHER

16 FURTHER READING

Curriculum Applicability

The Great Strike 1917 is a documentary film that is suitable for students in Years 9-12 in History, Civics and Citizenship, and Media Studies.

Using the film in the classroom

the Great Strike 1917 has a narrative structure that covers three main aspects:

- the story of the strike,
- the ways the strike has been largely forgotten in the past, and
- the ways the story is being remembered and commemorated today, particularly through a 2017 centennial exhibition.

The three strands are integrated in the structure of the film. In this Study Guide we suggest ways in which the strands can be explored, either in the order in which they are raised in the film, or as three separate strands that can be isolated for investigation.

The Study Guide also suggests an approach that can be used to help students analyse *The Great Strike 1917* as a representation of history, and also as an example of the documentary form of media.

The recommended classroom approach is:

- 1 Students think about a hypothetical situation to start considering the ideas that will be explored in the film
- 2 Students read the background information to the war that sets the context of the 1917 events (if necessary)
- 3 Students watch and analyse the ideas and issues raised in the film. They might watch the film in sequence, or they might isolate the three main themes in a revised sequence: The story, memory and commemoration, representing history. Below is a guide to using the film in either of these ways
- 4 Students consider the film as a representation of history, and/or as an example of the documentary form.

THE FILM SEQUENCE	CLASSROOM THEMES AND SEQUENCE			
Approx. Time code	The content	The story	Memory and commemoration	Representing history
00:00 – 09:45	The strike starts	1		
09:45 – 19:35	The 2017 display and commemoration		8	
19:35 – 24:30	The strike spreads	2		
24:30 – 25:35	The Industrial Workers of the World (IWW)			11
25:35 – 29:25	Impacts on social and working life	3		
29:25 – 38:45	The reaction starts	4		
38:45 – 41:30	The killing	5		
41:30 – 51:30	The cover-up	6		
51:30 – 54:50	A forgotten story		10	
55:20 – 57:40	Commemoration		9	
57:40 – 67:20	The end of the strike and outcomes	7		



Before Watching the Film

✿ Introducing students to the key ideas and concepts

The Great Strike 1917 covers experiences and behaviour that most students will not be familiar with in their own lives. Here is a way to help them tap into the key concepts and experiences that are explored in the documentary film.

Imagine that:

- Australia today is at war
- About 1 in 4 of the adults have chosen to enlist
- There has been fighting overseas for 3 years
- There have been many deaths and casualties
- The war is not being won, but it is not being lost either
- Most believe the war is justified, but are aware of the harm it does
- Conditions on the home front are harsh for many, but not all
- Wages have been frozen, prices have risen
- The government wants people to work harder and longer but for no more pay
- Some people believe we should make peace as soon as possible and oppose conscription of men for army service
- Others believe we should keep fighting to win
- The government is arresting people who try to discourage men from enlisting in the military service
- There is a call for a strike to prevent deterioration of working conditions
- The strike is supported by many workers and trade unions
- The strike is opposed by many people who believe it will hurt the war effort as essential supplies will be held back from the troops
- There are religious divisions – those who are Catholic are generally less supportive of the war than Protestants because Australia's main ally is not giving its own Catholics equal civil rights

What would people do?

Here are some characters that you can create, to see how they might react. Your task is to create a character by rolling a dice for each of the characteristics in the table above. In this way your class can create a community of various characters, and have them interact. Each time you roll the dice record what you have 'discovered' about that character.

CHARACTER NAME:					
Gender	M F	Age	0-15 15-30 30-45 45-60 60+	Connection with war?	Y N
Politics	L N IWW X	Religion	P C O	Economic status	H M L
Attitude to unions	F A	Attitude to war	H L	Attitude to government	S P O

Roll a dice to assign each of these characteristics to your character using the table below.

CHARACTERISTIC	DICE NUMBER					
	1	2	3	4	5	6
Gender	M	M	M	F	F	F
Age	0-15	15-30	15-30	30-45	45-60	60+
Direct connection to an enlisted soldier (family or friend)	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No
Politics	Labor	Labor	Nationalist	Nationalist	IWW	None
Religion	Protestant	Protestant	Protestant	Catholic	Catholic	Other
Wage and savings	Low	Low	Low	Medium	Medium	High
Attitude to unions	For	For	For	Against	Against	Against
Attitude to war	Top priority	Top priority	Top priority	Not top priority	Not top priority	Not top priority
Attitude to government	Support it fully	Support it fully	Support it partly	Support it partly	Oppose it	Oppose it

1 Is your character likely to support or oppose the strike?

2 What are the main characteristics that you think are determining your character's position on the strike?

3 Have a class discussion as your character about the strike. Speak to a character with the opposite attitude to you on the strike and try to convince them to move to your point of view.

4 What are the main characteristics that you think are what divide supporters of the strike from opponents?

Now read the background information that sets the context of Australia and the war in 1917, and then watch *The Great Strike 1917* to see what actually happened in a similar situation in Australia in 1917.

The Context of the 1917 Strike

1914

Outbreak of war in August when Britain declares war against Germany and its allies.

Australia is also legally covered by the British declaration of war.

Australia is culturally very much a British nation and most people, including the Australian Labor Party government and much of the labour movement, support Australian involvement in the war.

Extensive numbers of people oppose the war and compulsory conscription of men for war service. Among them are members of the Labor Party, trade unions and radical political associations, such as the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW).

1915

The first combat involving Australian troops occurs at Gallipoli, Turkey. The response to Australian involvement is the creation by many journalists and popular writers of the idea of the 'Anzac Spirit'.

The campaign was a failure resulting in heavy casualties of Australian soldiers. At home in Australia prices and costs started to soar but wages were frozen. While promotion of war support and recruitment continued, so too did opposition

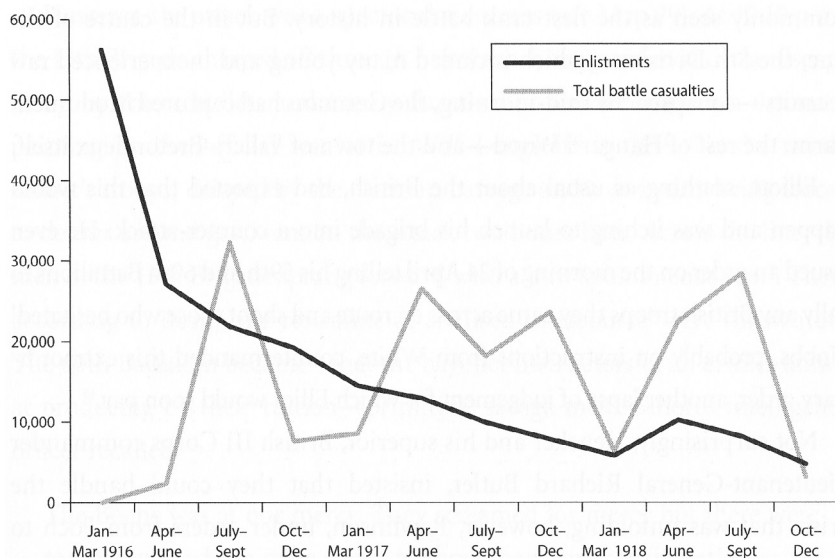
1916

Australian troops started to fight on the Western Front of northern France and Belgium. Casualties were heavy and recruitment numbers began to fall. *See chart on the left.*

Conditions in Australia become harder for many Australian working people and families.

The first attempt to introduce conscription of men for overseas service narrowly failed, but passions and divisions within communities grew.

The gap between those for whom the war was of primary importance, and those who became increasingly concerned about the need to protect working and living conditions within Australia, became greater and more obvious.



Joan Beaumont, *Broken Nation. Australians in the Great War*, Allen&Unwin, Sydney 2013, page 423

1917

The split in the Labor Party over the conscription issue was followed by an election, in which the win-the-war forces easily defeated the Labor Party and those calling for more emphasis on conditions at home.

After the election, the cost of living continued to increase with greatest impact on working class people. This, coupled with the continued rise in casualties, increased sectarian conflict between Catholics and Protestants, class and patriotic divisions within Australia. The number of industrial disputes also increased in number and intensity from 1916.

It was in this context that the 1917 strikes occurred. *See chart on the right.*

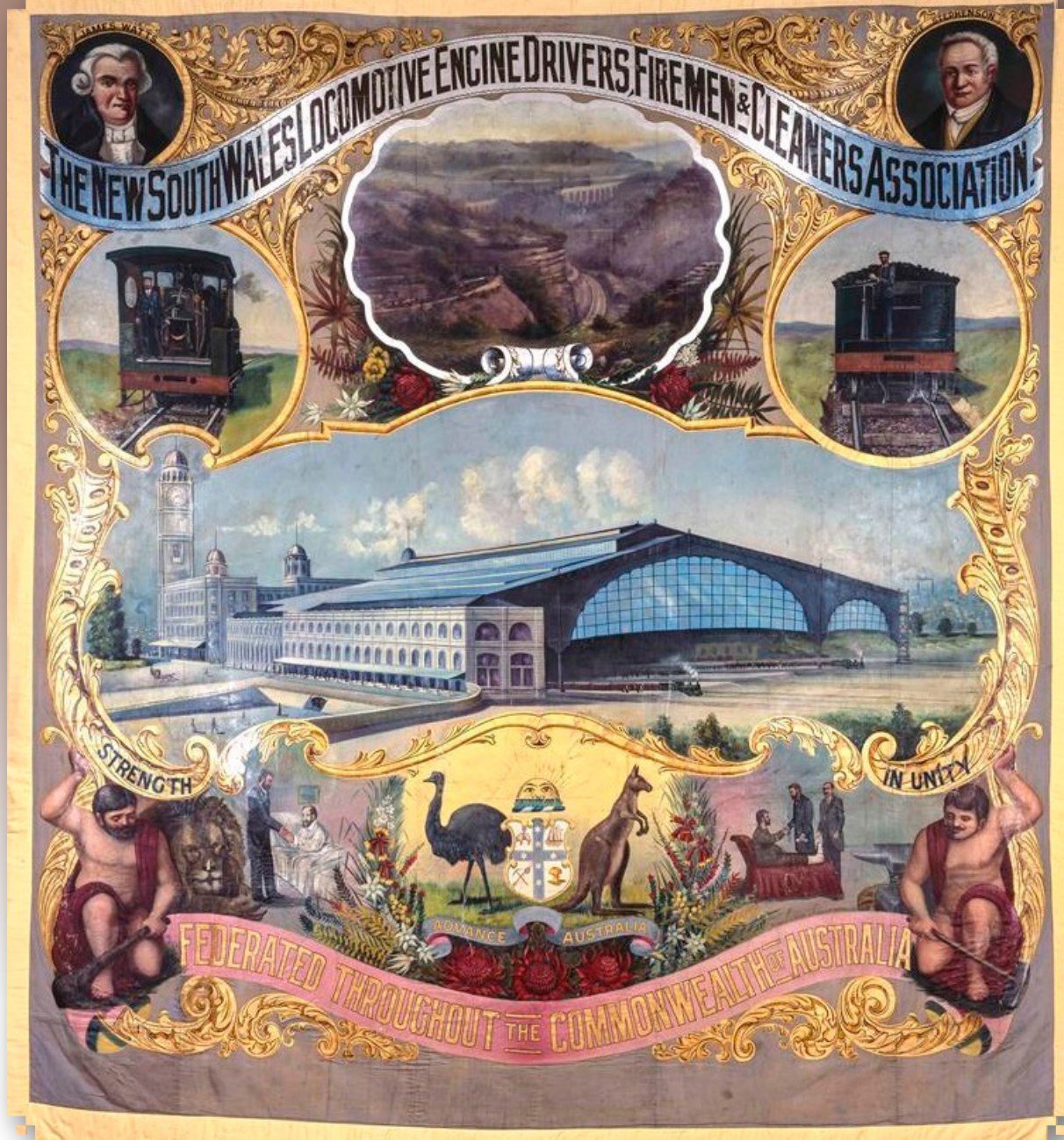
During 1917, the Great Strike, was followed by the Russian

	Number of disputes	Working days lost
1913	208	623,528
1914	337	1,090,395
1915	358	583,225
1916	508	1,678,930
1917	444	4,599,658
1918	298	580,853
1919	460	6,308,226

Source: Ernest Scott, *The Official History of Australia in the War of 1914–1918*, vol. XI, p. 665.

Revolution on the other side of the world. This freed German troops to move from the Eastern Front to the Western Front and put greater pressure on Britain and the allies. In late 1917, a second conscription referendum was held in Australia that reinforced divisions and brought hostility into the open.

1917 became known as the worst year of the war for Australia.



Exploring Ideas and Issues in the Film

Watch the film and answer the following questions. Some questions are designed to help you identify key information. Others are designed to help you formulate your own ideas and opinions about what you are learning. In these cases, you should clearly explain your responses and support them.

00:00 – 09:45

✿ The strike starts

- 1 What did the Card System that sparked the strike and why was it also known as the Taylor system or Scientific Management?
- 2 How did the employers justify introducing it?
- 3 Why did workers oppose it?

09:45 – 19:35

✿ The 2017 display and commemoration

- 1 During the demonstrations that accompanied the strike, many people, including the strikers carried or walked alongside banners.
- 2 Why were banners a feature of the union movement? What do they tell us about the working people who made and marched behind them?
- 3 Above is an example of one union banner. Identify the symbols on it and explain the values that these symbols represent. Make a list of the objects and images included in this banner and identify the ideas, values or attitudes that you think they represent. For example, the inclusion of the Australian coat of arms tells us that the unions were seen to be emblematic of the nation and proud to be Australian. See what other ideas and values you can infer from the symbols.



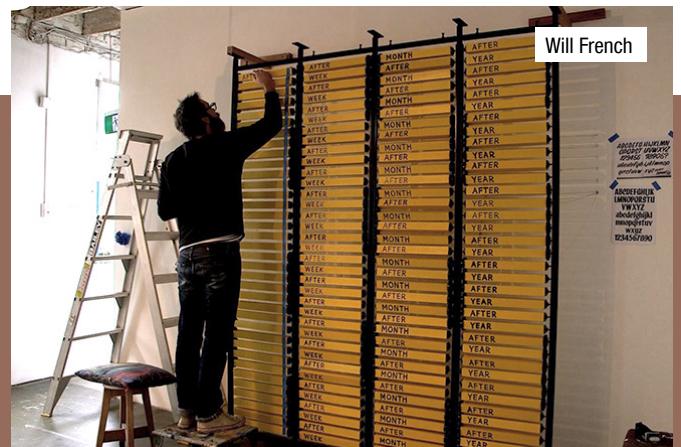
Tom Nicholson

3 The five artists who contributed to the 1917 Strike exhibition did so in different ways. Look at the examples of their responses on this page and explain what idea or message or meaning each is contributing to the exhibition.

4 What would you say is the key or predominant message of the exhibition from these artists for today's audience?



Sarah Contos



Will French



Frank Gohier



Raquel Ormella

19:35 – 24:30

The strike spreads

1 Many people who were not directly affected by the card system joined the strike. Suggest reasons why this happened. The possible reasons could include personal, social, economic, or ideological ones.

2 Look at one of the many scenes showing the strikers during a demonstration against the card system, such as the one on the right. What is your impression of them?

3 How would a comparable scene today be similar and different from this one from 1917?



24:30 – 25:35

The IWW

1 One of the groups singled out for discussion is the Industrial Workers of the World, or IWW. What impression do you get from the film of their size, beliefs, activities and influence?

2 Below is another view of the IWW, from historian Joan Beaumont. Compare it with the information and opinion expressed in the documentary by Tom Nicholson. Identify the similarities and differences in the way the IWW is presented by the two sources.

The most vicious repression was reserved for the Industrial Workers of the World. With a membership of about 2000 across Australia, the 'Wobblies' were not a serious threat to the Australian political order, despite their ideological commitment to Marxism, class warfare and the destruction of capitalism. But from August 1914, they had been implacably opposed to a war in which, as they saw it, the working class had no stake. As the IWW newspaper *Direct Action* said soon after the war commenced:

Workers you have nothing to 'gain' by volunteering to fight the battles of your masters . . . Make class before country your motto. Your class have made the Empire for the few to live in and to enjoy the fruits of your labour. When the Empire is in danger, let those who own and control it, fight for it.

Naturally the IWW opposed all recruitment, be it voluntary or compulsory, and even encouraged workers to sabotage the war effort by 'go slows'.

For Hughes and the pro-conscriptionists, the IWW could easily be represented as the epitome of disloyalty and subversion. The *Sydney Morning Herald* described the movement as a

'viper in our bosom which must be killed or it will strike when we can least guard against it.' Hughes also declared that 'You have to go for them with the ferocity of a Bengal tiger. They have no nationality; they have no religion. There is only one thing they understand and that is force.' There was in fact no clear evidence that the IWW was practising sabotage, but this did not really matter. After a number of suspicious fires broke out in Sydney, twelve IWW leaders in New South Wales were arrested in late September on charges of forgery, treason, felony, conspiracy and arson.

Their trial was deeply flawed. The only evidence against the accused was provided by police informers, and it was uncorroborated. The defendants' alibis were disallowed. Yet all twelve IWW leaders were found guilty on all or some of the charges and received prison sentences of five to fifteen years. Two sentences were reduced in February 1917 on appeal. The IWW 'Twelve' soon became martyrs of the working class, but their treatment also troubled civil libertarians concerned about the erosion of the very freedoms that Australia was supposedly fighting to defend. As Anstey said, 'What is the good of victory abroad if it only gives us slavery at home?'

Joan Beaumont, *Broken Nation. Australians in the Great War*, Allen&Unwin, Sydney, 2013 pages 233-4

3 Does the film present what seems to be a fair image of the IWW, or an overly benevolent view?

25:35 – 29:25

Impacts on life

- 1 What were the impacts of the strike on those who participated in it and on their families?
- 2 What was the impact on the community and society?

29:25 – 38:45

The reaction starts

- 1 Who organised against the strikers?
- 2 What was their motivation for doing so?
- 3 On the right is a cartoon published after the defeat of the first conscription referendum in 1916. What does it show about the attitude of the cartoonist towards the war, and towards those who do not share his view?
- 4 How might the divisions and hostility shown by this cartoon help you understand the reactions of people for and against the strike?

38:45 – 41:30

The killing

- 1 How and why was Mervyn Flanagan killed?
- 2 Was he 'murdered'?

41:30 – 51:30

The cover-up

- 1 What evidence is presented to establish that the crime was protected by the government? Consider such elements in terms of personal connections, political connections, social connections.
- 2 What attitudes and divisions within society do the quoted letters show? How is this similar to social media today?
- 3 Why was the film censored and banned?
- 4 What arguments could be used to justify this action at the time?
- 5 What arguments could be used to condemn this censorship at the time?



<https://www.oldtreasurybuilding.org.au/propaganda-and-the-conscription-debate/>

51:30 – 54:30

A forgotten story

- 1 The family of Mervyn Flanagan did not know his story. Suggest reasons why such a story might not be passed on within a family over time.
- 2 Do you agree that an injustice was done to Flanagan?
- 3 Do you agree that he was a 'martyr'?



55:20 – 57:40

🌸 Commemoration

- 1 Why might the story of the Great Strike have disappeared from public memory?
- 2 The emphasis in this section of the film is on the 'Lilywhites'. Who were they?
- 3 Why does the film emphasise them?

57:40 – 67:20

🌸 The end of the strike and outcomes

- 1 What were the main outcomes of the strike, both short-term and long-term?

Bringing it Together

How does *The Great Strike 1917* help you understand the following aspects of Australia's First World War experience:

- 1 Why were there strong divisions and passions in Australia during World War One?
- 2 Why were Australians not united on all aspects of the war?
- 3 Why were working people ready to make great economic and personal sacrifices during the strike?
- 4 Do you think the strikers were justified in their actions?
- 5 Do you think the strike breakers were justified in their actions?
- 6 What does the film suggest are the messages or lessons from the event that are still relevant for us today?
- 7 Why has the Great Strike slipped from public memory?
- 8 What is remembered about World War One today?
- 9 What is remembered in your community, about this war, and about its significance? Investigate local memories in your family and community, memorials, statues, street names, etc.

The Great Strike 1917 as a Representation of History

A documentary film is a representation of history – that is, it is somebody's version of the events. The filmmaker decides what images to use, how to present them, in what order, with what background sound, and what to keep in and what to leave. Your knowledge of the event is almost solely based on the information presented in the film, and therefore on this version of the event. The version may be fair and accurate and complete, or it may not. Do you think the film gives you a fair,

accurate, and complete version of the Great Strike of 1917?

Use the following table to help you consider this issue.

Look back at the character you created. How do you think that person would respond to *The Great Strike 1917*? Would that person say that the film has accurately and fairly represented their point of view?

ASPECT	COMMENTS
Does it explain the historical context well?	
Does it clearly identify when, where, what, how, who was involved?	
Does it present the main facts accurately?	
Does it contribute to your understanding of why events happened as they did?	
Does it help you empathise with people of the past – to really understand and appreciate their attitudes and values from their standpoint?	
Does the film provide a variety of perspectives on the events?	

ASPECT	COMMENTS
Does the film explain if there are aspects where facts or interpretations are disputed or where there is disagreement?	
Does the film present a particular message?	
Does the film use evidence in a fair, accurate, and balanced way?	
Does the film explain the outcomes of the events?	
Does the film explain the significance of the issues that were involved?	
Are judgements made in the film fair and supported by the evidence?	
At the end did you feel that you know and understand what happened and why?	

What does *The Great Strike 1917* help us understand about the documentary style?

The Great Strike 1917 is a documentary film. There are different types of documentaries. They can be:

- **Fly-on-the-wall**
- **Point-of-view**
- **Argumentative/persuasive/activist**
- **Narrative, storytelling, informational**

1 Which type is this one? Justify your answer.

2 Does it have elements of the others in it? Explain your view.

3 A documentary film uses a variety of elements and strategies to have an impact. Consider the way the following elements in the table below are used in *The Great Strike 1917*. Summarise your ideas in the Comment column. You should also read the interview with the filmmaker on the next page to help you formulate your views.

Do you think that *The Great Strike 1917* is an effective and well-made documentary?

ASPECT	COMMENTS
Structure of the documentary	
The way the story is explained	
Tone or style of the film	
Use of music, sound	
Use of historic photographs and documents	
Repeated use of limited historic footage	
Use of interviews with strike participants, historians, and people involved in the exhibition	
The use of modern locations or scenes to simulate historic reconstructions	
The use of editing	
Any other features that you notice	

Interview with filmmaker Amanda King

The Great Strike 1917 is a new documentary film, which retells the largely forgotten story of one of Australia's largest industrial conflicts and the impact it had on society at the time. In August 1917, workers in the workshops at the Eveleigh Railway Workshops — today encompassed by the Carriageworks and the Australian Technology Park — went on strike to protest the introduction of a new timecard system designed to improve productivity. Ahead of the film's World Premiere at the Antenna Documentary Film Festival, director Amanda King shared what compelled her to tell this story with Screen NSW.

How does it feel to have your documentary premiere at the Antenna Documentary Film Festival 2019?

It was wonderful and exciting news to have the film accepted into the Festival. The film tells a significant story largely unknown to Australian audiences despite its impacts at the time. It became almost inadvertently a taboo subject. Unlike the Gallipoli campaign, which has been seared into the nation's story because of the scale of loss of life, the opposite occurred.

Your documentary tells the untold story of The Great Strike of 1917 in Sydney and the fallout it had on society at the time. Why was it so important to tell this story?

The film tells the little-known story of an outpouring of solidarity among working class people for transport workers who went on strike in 1917 in Sydney. It was Australia's largest industrial dispute proportionally for the population of the time.

It was important to tell the story because it was such a major event, it was dramatic, and had received little attention except by academics, who did fine research work unravelling the events. While the unionised workforce was much larger in those times, the same kinds of pressures and challenges continue for workers today.

You use a combination of archival footage and interview material. How did you gain access to the footage?

It was largely the research conducted by academics and more recently staff at the National Film and Sound Archive and City of Sydney history unit. They brought the archival material to light, in preparation for the 100-year centenary of the event, culminating in an exhibition which was held at Carriageworks. The interviewees are drawn from that pool of academics, the 1917 Strike Committee members, people who had a direct connections with the strike through family members who participated in it, and artists commissioned to create work for the exhibition.

How has making this documentary helped you develop as a documentary filmmaker?



This is the first documentary I have directed where the story is entirely historical. Along with my partner, cinematographer Fabio Cavadini, we evaluated where the archival footage carried the story. Of a one-hour documentary made at the time, only 16 minutes remain, along with three newsreels. The censorship and loss of so much of the original film meant we had gaps that needed filling. During the install of the centenary exhibition we began filming — including rehearsals and the work of five young artists who contributed to the exhibition. Along with some semi-abstract re-creations, they all assisted to bring a historical event to life.

Digital Designer Miriana Marusic worked brilliantly with the still photographs and news clippings, adding greatly to their impact.

We plan to use some of these techniques in a sequel documentary about a more recent industrial dispute, the 1998 Patrick Dispute, (working title), *An Unlawful Conspiracy*.

What do you hope the audience will learn from watching The Great Strike 1917?

We hope audiences will reflect on the cyclical nature of history. Despite having occurred over 100 years ago, the story still has great potency. The tensions and schisms between the employed and the employers reverberate to this day. It is fascinating to gain insights into how that played out a century ago. Even to this day, Government documents have still not been released about the circumstances of the events and decisions that were made during the strike.

<https://www.screen.nsw.gov.au/news/the-great-strike-1917>

Further Reading

Phil Cashen, *Shire at War* blog

<https://shireatwar.com/2017/08/25/132-the-great-strike-august-1917/>

Laila Ellmoos, Great Strike of 1917, *Dictionary of Sydney* website

https://dictionaryofsydney.org/entry/great_strike_of_1917

Lucy Taksa, The 1917 General Strike, *Evatt Foundation* website

<https://evatt.org.au/papers/1917-general-strike.html>

Taksa, L., 'The Great Strike and Its Impact', in Ellmoos, L., and Miall, N., 1917: *The Great Strike*. Sydney: Carriageworks, pp. 20-26.

Ernest Scott, *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-1918, Volume XI, Australia During the War*, Chapter XX, Labour Questions and the Industrial Ferment, available online at <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C1416956>

Trevor Edmonds, *The Strike That Never Ended*, Transport Heritage NSW, 2017

John Connor, Peter Stanley and Peter Yule, *The*

Centenary History of Australia and the Great War,

Volume 4, *The War at Home*, Chapter 9, Striking:

Industrial Relations During the War, Oxford University Press, South Melbourne, 2015

Taksa, L. (2017) *The New South Wales 1917 Strike in*

Retrospect: Commemorating Past Struggles for Workplace Rights (Sydney: Unions NSW)

<https://www.mq.edu.au/research/research-centres-groups-and-facilities/prosperous-economies/centres/centre-for-workforce-futures/publications/publications-for-general-audiences>

Lucy Taksa, 'Remembering and Learning from the NSW General Strike of 1917', *Australian Society for the Study of Labour History* website

<https://labourhistory.org.au/hummer/hummer-vol-12-no-2-2017/remembering/>

Joan Beaumont, *Broken Nation, Australians in the Great War*, Chapter 4, 1917: the worst year, Allen&Unwin, Sydney, 2013

The Great Strike is distributed by Ronin Films

PO Box 680, Mitchell ACT 2911, AUSTRALIA

www.roninfilms.com.au

Ph: 02 6248 0851



This study guide was produced by ATOM. (© ATOM 2020)

ISBN: 978-1-76061-357-0 **editor@atom.org.au**

Study guide designed by Pascale van Breugel.

To download other study guides,
plus thousands of articles on Film as Text,
Screen Literacy, Multiliteracy and Media Studies,
visit <<https://theeducationshop.com.au>>.

Join ATOM's email broadcast list for invitations to
free screenings, conferences, seminars, etc.

Sign up now at <http://www.metromagazine.com.au/email_list/>.