‘The siege of union street’: Working class urban heritage and the politics of remembrance

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Abstract
This paper explores the significance of the events of 19 June 1931 at a property in Union Street in Newtown, in Sydney’s inner western suburbs, in the context of what is argued is a neglect of heritage associated with working class themes and themes of protest within the NSW heritage system. The anti-eviction battle at this property during the Great Depression is noteworthy as it culminated in the ‘biggest spontaneous demonstration of the 1930s’ (Irving and Cahill 2010: 202) in Australia, and is directly associated with dramatic law reform by the NSW Government to give unemployed tenants greater protection against eviction and reduce rents. Despite the historical and re-emerging social significance of the events associated with this place, it lacks official heritage recognition. We argue that this neglect arises from the Authorised Heritage Discourse (AHD, see Smith 2006) as it is reproduced through the NSW heritage system, and support this with a review of local and state heritage listings for the suburb of Newtown, which reveal a dearth of listed heritage associated with working class social history and the broader theme of social protest. The lack of formal recognition of this place, combined with no form of memorialisation or other community-based remembrance strategy, means that these events have diminished within local collective memory, despite the ongoing community relevance of the call for housing justice and human rights that the siege of Union Street represents.

Introduction
This paper discusses the events of 19 June 1931, at a house in Union Street in Newtown, Sydney; the most noteworthy example of a series of anti-eviction protests organised by the working class social movement, the Unemployed Workers’ Movement (UWM), during the economic crisis known as the Great Depression (1929-1933). As will be discussed, these events precipitated significant, if short-lived, law reform by the NSW Lang Labor Government to ameliorate the housing distress experienced by the unemployed at this time.

We seek to demonstrate the significance of these events in terms of NSW and Australian heritage criteria and legislation, to argue that this place is of significance to the working class heritage of NSW. We base our case on an explanation of the historical importance of the events in relation to NSW and Australian historic themes, the past and re-emerging social significance of these events, and the lack of closely comparable items on the State Heritage Inventory (SHI).

The place’s current lack of formal recognition is discussed in relation to literature in the field of critical heritage studies on working class heritage and the Authorised Heritage Discourse (AHD, see Smith 2006), to argue that this omission is a manifestation of the neglect of working class social history and political movements within government defined heritage systems. This
argument is supported by an analysis of items currently listed on the SHI for the suburb of Newtown as of local and state significance. While it is acknowledged that this trend is changing, examples to the contrary, several of which are highlighted below, could still be described as exceptions that prove the rule.

The AHD and working class heritage

A number of contemporary scholars working in the heritage field have, like Dicks (2015: 369), identified a ‘long history of ‘exclusivity’ and elitism in relation to heritage’ (see also Harrison 2013; Smith 2006; Shackel, Smith and Campbell 2011). Dicks (2015) and Harrison (2013) trace the origin of the critique of officially sanctioned heritage to writers such as Hewison (1987), who aligned the heritage industry in Britain with a conservative Thatcherism that looked back with ‘nostalgia for the past as a golden age’ in the context of social and economic decline (Harrison 2013: 112). Smith further developed this critique of official, state-based heritage through the notion of the AHD to describe a dominant heritage ‘that privileges monumentality and grand scale, innate artefact/site significance tied to time depth, scientific/aesthetic expert judgement, social consensus and nation building’ (Smith 2006: 11). More recently she and her co-authors have noted,

[n]ot only does this tend to ignore dissonant and subaltern heritage… but it also works to deny the cultural and historical legitimacy and agency of those groups, including working class people, whose cultural, social and historical experiences fall outside the conceptual frameworks validated by the AHD (Shackel, Smith and Campbell 2011: 291).

Heritage of protest and social conflict involving marginalised social groups such as the unemployed, particularly where there is no happy resolution to the issues raised, could be regarded as ‘uncomfortable or dissonant heritage’ (Smith, Shackel and Campbell 2011: 2) of this type.

The property and its context

The Municipality of Newtown was proclaimed in 1862, and although its western side was originally home to the middle class, by the start of the twentieth century it had shifted to a predominately working class area (Murphy 2013: 228). Newtown residents worked in local industries such as Cragos Flour Mill and Fowler Ceramics, and were also employed as domestic servants (Sydney City Council 2000-14a). However the socio-cultural background of Newtown changed over the course of the mid- to late-twentieth century, as a result of a range of processes, including the gentrification of areas of inner Sydney (Murphy 2013: 243).

Gentrification involves the ‘transformation of an area from a predominately working class low income locale to a middle class or high-income locality’ (Morris 2017: 149), and is linked to major economic shifts such as deindustrialisation. Morris explains that it also involves a cultural and aesthetic aspect whereby areas seen as undesirable begin to be perceived as attractive neighbourhoods to the middle and upper classes. The influx of middle class residents results in the refurbishment of homes, and rising property values, effectively making them unaffordable to working class people and resulting in their displacement (Morris 2017). From a heritage conservation perspective, a push to refurbish existing housing stock can result in the loss of the character of an area and properties of cultural significance.

One of the ways that Sydney City Council (SCC) has attempted to address the threat posed by redevelopment is by creating Heritage Conservation Areas (HCA), whereby proposed changes to houses in certain streets and suburbs are subject to a Heritage Impact Assessment (HIA). The Union Street property in question is a two storey brick Victorian terrace house, located in a HCA in recognition of the value of the working class housing of the locality, but is not subject to an individual heritage listing.¹ The date of construction of the property is unknown, however it was in use from the late 1880s.² It is characteristic of the Australian terrace architectural style, and retains its original façade and a number of Victorian period features, including a decorative cast iron balcony (Irving and Apperly 1985; Evans 1983). It is currently a private residential dwelling.
The event

On 19 June 1931, during the economic crisis known as the Great Depression (1929-33), the UWM called a mass meeting at a house in Union Street in Newtown to protest an eviction order due to expire at 4pm the following day (Sydney Morning Herald (SMH), 19 June 1931: 1). The tenants, an unemployed man and his wife and children, had been issued with the eviction order for rent arrears (Workers Weekly, 11 September 1931: 1). The house, owned by a Mrs Lee who lived nearby, was occupied by 19 men and barricaded with sand bags and barbed wire. A large crowd gathered to listen to the speakers from 11am and stayed on. Shortly before noon, 60 police arrived in a half a dozen cars and approached the building to carry out the eviction order (SMH, 20 June 1931: 13).
Witnesses for the defence and prosecution in the trial that followed reported that police immediately began shooting at the house and stormed it from three sides (Hood 2014). Hood suggests that the police opening fire may have been intended to cover their rear entry to the house, or that it was in response to stones thrown by the protesters, about which there is mixed evidence from primary sources. After a confrontation reported to have lasted 20 minutes (SMH, 19 June 1931: 1), the police overpowered the occupants who were ‘dragged almost insensible to waiting paddy wagons’. The police were ‘jeered and threatened’ by a ‘hostile [crowd] numbering many thousand. They filled the street for a quarter of a mile until squads of police drove them back…and police cordons were thrown across the roadway’ (SMH, 20 June 1931: 13).

There were injuries on both sides, including shotgun wounds (two) and head injuries (at least nine) among the picketers, while only two police officers needed hospital attention (SMH, 20 June 1931: 13). The picketers reported being fired upon and subjected to brutal treatment and verbal abuse by the police, as John Stace recalls:

[w]hen the police got into the house they batten us unmercifully, whether we showed fight or not, calling us communist b’s, and saying “I’ll give you red Russia, you bastards”… They said that Lang should pass a bill to shoot the lot of us at sight (John Stace quoted in Wheatley 1980: 225).

Witness statements and description of injuries suggest that many resulted from being batoned, punched and kicked by police. These events were reported in the SMH of 19 and 20 June 1931 as an ‘eviction riot’ and a ‘sensational eviction battle in which iron bars, piping, rude bludgeons and chairs were used by the defenders, and batons by the police’ (SMH, 20 June 1931: 13).

The police made 19 arrests, and these men were taken to Long Bay Gaol and remanded in custody (Cottle and Keys 2008). They appeared before the Newtown Police Court on 15 July 1931, charged with unlawfully assembling and causing a disturbance, and were committed for trial in August; bail was set at £80 for each defendant (SMH, 16 July 1931: 6). However, according to Preston, their defence barrister Clive Evatt argued successfully that there had never before been riot charges under common law in Australia, and that rioting by definition took place in public. Consequently, the Newtown defendants escaped conviction (Preston 2010: 40).
Figure 3, from a Daily Telegraph article entitled ‘Yesterday’s Red Rioting’ purports to show ‘members of the anti-eviction committee haranguing the crowd’ in Union Street, before the arrival of police. Use of emotive language such as ‘haranguing’ and ‘rioting’ sensationalised this event, and emphasised the allegedly violent behaviour of protesters.

Figure 4, entitled ‘Scene of Eviction of Unemployed’, shows police and some of the crowd that gathered and formed part of this event. The text accompanying this image describes the Newtown house as one, ‘from which a large body of anti-evictionists was dislodged yesterday.’ The generally unsympathetic tone of newspapers such as the SMH towards the protesters, typically described as communists, is a feature of the reporting of the event.

Figure 5 is a staged shot of makeshift weapons that police claimed were used against them by protesters in Union Street in Newtown, published by the SMH at the time of the defendants’ first court appearance. It was clearly intended to portray the protesters as violent, however there was no comparable image of weapons such as guns and batons used by police against the protesters.

Heritage significance

A systematic assessment of these events using NSW and Australian Government heritage policy, legislation and standards for Australian heritage professionals, such as the Australia ICOMOS Burra Charter (2013), was conducted by the authors as postgraduate students. The assessment found that the events could be argued to be of heritage value for reasons of historic significance. Social significance was also identified, but was harder to demonstrate partly due to the tendency of past events that are un-memorialised to fade from community recognition.

When determining historic significance, NSW heritage guidelines indicate that ‘the item must be able to demon-strate an important aspect or element of a particular theme/s in the historical development of NSW’ (NSW Heritage Office 2006a). Key themes have been codified by the NSW Heritage Office (2006c) with relevance to NSW, and by the Australian Heritage Commission (2001) for Australia as a whole. We argue that this place/event demonstrates important aspects of numerous Australian and NSW historic themes and sub-themes, including ‘Coping with unemployment’; ‘Protesting’; ‘Policing Australia’; ‘Dispensing justice’; ‘Law Reform’ and ‘Providing Services and Welfare’.
Historic events at Union Street are directly related to the national heritage themes of protesting and law reform. On 26 June 1931, seven days after the Newtown events, Joseph Lamaro, the NSW Attorney General, tabled a *Fair Rents and Lessees’ Relief Bill*. This Bill, later passed as the *Reduction of Rent Act 1931* (assented 7 Oct 1931), reduced rents by 22.5% and made leases that did not acknowledge this reduction illegal. The other piece of significant tenancy reform legislation introduced into the NSW Parliament after the Newtown events was the *Ejectments Postponement Bill 1931* (assented 14 August 1931). This Bill prohibited eviction from a dwelling house without an order of the court, in which case the landlord could not evict the tenant for a period of three months from the date of application. If the court could be shown that the rent could not be paid, the period could be extended indefinitely (Simpson 1999).

A number of primary and secondary sources, including local and international newspapers, directly link the Newtown events with the legislative reforms that took place in 1931 (Preston 2010; Cottle and Keys 2008; *Workers’ Weekly* 10 July 1931, 1; *SMH* 20 June 1931, 13; *South China Post* 29 June 1931, 11). The existence of such a link seems highly likely, as the *SMH* reported that the State Parliamentary Labour Caucus met on the 19 June 1931, the same day as the eviction, and approved amending the *Fair Rents Act* ‘without delay’ to prevent eviction of unemployed tenants (*SMH* 20 June 1931: 13). This is reported on the same page as coverage of the Newtown events, under the headline ‘Prevention of Evictions, Amending Legislation Proposed’. Preston (2010: 40) notes that Jock Garden, Secretary of the Labor Council, and an ally of the Premier, opened his pre-selection candidature by ‘promising that there would be no more evictions and that the government would introduce anti-eviction legislation’ on 20 June 1931, one day after the Newtown events.

Respected Depression historian Nadia Wheatley explains that ALP branches and union groups passed resolutions of support for the Newtown anti-evictionists and that ‘Lang’s changes to eviction laws after months of vacillating must be seen in the context of political embarrassment of ALP Ministers and the Labor council over the treatment of the unemployed at […] Union St’ (Wheatley 1981: 35-36). While the Attorney General Mr Lamaro claimed that such legislation had been ‘under consideration by the Government for some time’, (*SMH* 20 June 1931: 13), this was reported with scepticism by the *Workers’ Weekly*, which asserted that:

[n]othing was ever heard of such a Bill, though the Lang government had been in office for many months, until the unemployed, under the leadership of the UWM, had taken a stand against the wholesale eviction of workers (*Workers’ Weekly* 28 August 1931: 4).

Even if the Bill, as the Government insisted, had already been in development, it seems likely that the events at Union Street acted as the catalyst for the Lang Government to introduce this legislation into Parliament, which might otherwise have been further delayed, or even not have occurred, particularly given the short remaining life of this Government.

The Lang Government was sacked by the NSW Governor on 13 May 1932 and after an election that Lang lost, was replaced by the more conservative United Australia Party and Country Party Coalition Government. This change in government saw the passage of the *Landlord and Tenant (Amendment) Act 1932* which repealed the *Ejectments Postponement Act 1931*, and rent reduction legislation was made more favourable to landlords. While not all of the tenancy reforms introduced by Lang were abolished, they were significantly diluted. The reforms were thus short lived, and some historians question their importance, noting that evictions continued to occur (Cottle and Keys 2008). However it could be argued that any such reforms, won by popular action from government, are significant not simply for any practical effect, but for their symbolic value to those involved. It is this symbolic value that is celebrated in the song ‘The Siege of Union Street’ by Hulett and Swarbrick:

‘They’d bashed us bloody and raw  
But it forced Jack Lang to change the law  
Now the landlords have to cop it sweet  
And the Red Flag flies over Union Street’ (Hulett 2010).
The events of 19 June 1931 are also important in demonstrating the theme of social protest, in which working people took up leadership roles. People who became unemployed during the Great Depression found that many others were unsympathetic to their plight. The middle and upper classes commonly believed that the unemployed did not want to work (McWilliams 1977; Lowenstein 1981), and the organised labour movement represented by the Labor Councils and Labor Party was not immediately sympathetic. It became apparent to the unemployed that if they and their families were to survive, they needed to organise to assist themselves and other unemployed people, and to bring pressure to bear on those in authority, such as the NSW Government, relief authorities, and individual landlords.

The most active and effective organisation of unemployed people was the Unemployed Workers’ Movement (UWM), founded by the Australian Communist Party (ACP) on May Day 1930 at Sydney Trades Hall. Although the ACP was responsible for its founding and ACP members were actively involved, Wheatley (1981) notes that the UWM quickly expanded beyond the control of the ACP and that the vast majority of members were ordinary unemployed people who did not belong to the Party.

The UWM publicly voiced demands for full time work at award wages and conditions, or sustenance at basic wage rates and a moratorium on evictions, directing these claims to the NSW Government (Wheatley 1981; Lowenstein 1978). Public protest tactics included mass demonstrations, marches, deputations and petitions, with the goal of changing the policies of the NSW government, local governments and relief authorities. Marches of the unemployed, often in their thousands, commenced in NSW in 1927 with a march on Parliament, and continued at least until 1932, with banners proclaiming ‘We Demand Work or Basic Wage Maintenance’ and ‘We Demand the Right to Live’ (Wheatley 1981: 29). Wheatley describes these tactics as inherently legal and relying on traditional liberal democratic protest methods.

While winning some concessions, the NSW Government was largely unresponsive to the demands of the UWM, dismissing it as the work of communist agitators. In fact, Wheatley (1981) notes that Lang refused to meet UWM deputations, including on the occasion of two marches on Parliament on the same day in February 1930, with a total of 1600 unemployed involved. In the face of this unresponsiveness, the UWM staged a series of pickets and house occupations to prevent evictions of unemployed families from May 1930 until June 1931, of which the events at Union Street were the most noteworthy. These tactics were reportedly successful in preventing over 200 evictions (Wheatley cited in Preston 2010: 38; Workers’ Weekly 31 July 1931: 4).

In addition to the importance of the events at Union Street as evidence of the protest tactics of the UWM, they are also significant because of the large crowd, purportedly ‘of many thousands’ (SMH 20 June 1931: 13), that formed in support of the anti-evictionists. Irving and Cahill describe this as the ‘[b]iggest spontaneous demonstration of the 1930s’ (Irving and Cahill 2010: 202), while Wheatley refers to it as ‘the most militant gathering of ordinary Sydney people in the decade’ (Wheatley 1980: 228).

These events are also associated with the national heritage theme of being homeless, and the NSW heritage theme of domestic life. After unsuccessfully advocating with the property’s managing agent for leniency, with an offer to pay part of what was owed (Workers’ Weekly 26 June 1931: 1), the UWM organised this event to prevent the homelessness of the tenants residing in the property, an unemployed man and his wife and children, and to draw attention to the homelessness crisis of this period. At this time inner city suburbs such as Newtown were comprised mainly of working class people, who lived primarily in rented housing. Their jobs in factories were among the first to be lost in the economic crisis, which saw male unemployment reach 38.9% in Newtown by 1933, well above the NSW average of 32% and three times the rate in more affluent suburbs such as Vaucluse (Spearitt 1981).

As relief for the unemployed was in the form of rations, rather than cash, most faced extreme difficulty continuing to pay rent. Mass evictions soon followed, and had a profound impact on the social fabric of the neighbourhood. Autobiographical accounts of the period indicate that once people had been made homeless due to non-payment of rent, they struggled to obtain
other rented accommodation (McWilliams 1977). Oral histories describe Newtown as a close knit and supportive community where food was shared and the homeless taken in, if there was room to spare (Rosen 1995). However, if alternative accommodation could not be found, whole families and their furniture were put out on the street. Many had no option but to move into unemployed camps on the outskirts of Sydney such as Happy Valley at La Perouse, and live in makeshift shelters without running water or sanitation.

Social Significance

The Australia ICOMOS *Burra Charter* defines social value as ‘the associations that a place has for a particular community or cultural group and the social or cultural meanings that it holds for them’ (Australia ICOMOS 2013: 4). NSW SHR criterion (d) describes a ‘strong or special association with a particular community or cultural group in NSW for social, cultural or spiritual reasons’. While there are guides to assessing social significance in the Australian context (Johnston 1992; Byrne et. al. 2003), it is fair to say that processes for establishing social significance are less clear than for other criteria such as historical significance, and that it is a criterion that does not figure as prominently in state sponsored heritage recognition systems (Jones 2017).

This is despite the fact that the *Burra Charter* includes social significance as one of the values that goes to make up cultural significance, and does not prioritise one value over another. It does seem clear however that social value refers to contemporary community esteem rather than significance to previous generations, and this has implications for being able to establish social significance for past events. Questions of remembrance and social significance can thus be viewed as political, if community remembrance lapses due to state neglect.

There is strong evidence to suggest that the events of Union Street had community significance in the collective memory of Newtown residents, and those active in the UWM in the 1930s and the decades to follow. The place was remembered as a site of working class protest against the injustices and deprivations of the Great Depression, particularly the mass evictions of families in working class suburbs such as Newtown. Various oral histories (Rosen 1995; Wheatley 1978) indicate that these events had strong meaning to those involved, to the broader Newtown community and to the many NSW UWM members. For example Grace Schwebel, a lifelong Newtown resident born in 1916, recalls the events at Union Street as a ‘horror story’ in a 1995 oral history taken by Rosen. She also recalls that the whole community came together to help those who, in her words, were being ‘tipped out’ onto the street and this demonstrated ‘working class standards’ of mutual support (Schwebel in Rosen 1995: 54).

The former Greens Senator Lee Riannon, who lived in Newtown in the 1950s, also remembers hearing her parents and their friends talking about the battle of Union Street, and notes that she ‘never forgot the sense of empowerment the story of the fight for dignity and justice gave them’ (Irving and Cahill 2010: 196). Senator Riannon’s comments suggest that memory of these events was kept alive in some families, most likely those with a direct involvement. Lowenstein’s 1978 oral history of Harry, an unemployed workers’ organiser, also emphasised the idealism of the UWM. Harry told Lowenstein:

> I maintain that there is something about human life that is more sacred than the rights of property and profit, and...we had to throw our full weight into the struggle to maintain these human rights (Lowenstein 1978: 214).

The ‘fight’, courage and initiative shown by the UWM meant that for Harry ‘the depression brought out the immense capabilities of working people’ (Lowenstein 1978: 214-15). These qualities of pride, initiative and capability are some of the important past community meanings of the place, associated not just with the events of 19 June, but with the UWM in general. The ‘fight’ of the UWM was expressed in a song of the ‘militant unemployed’, cited by Cottle and Keys (2008: 193) which celebrates the events at both Brancourt Avenue in Bankstown,³ and Union Street:

> ‘At Bankstown and at Newtown
We made the cops feel sore
We fought well
They got hell
As we met them at the door
We met them at the door boys
We met them at the door’.4

Memory is to some extent generational, unless it is preserved in oral history accounts, through intergenerational transmission, or through contemporary memorialisation. Like much of inner Sydney, Newtown has become gentrified, and the working class demographic of the 1930s no longer characterises the area. Taking into account the post-World War II working class exodus to the Sydney suburbs, and the amount of time that has elapsed, it is unlikely that many people alive in 1931, or their descendants, remain in Newtown, and that few continue to remember these events.

However social significance assessment expert Chris Johnston (1992) explains that a place that ‘marks an important but forgotten aspect of local history may again come into local prominence after its history is recalled, and may then gain … contemporary social value over time’ (16). She also notes that ‘[t]he very process of assessing the cultural significance of a place involves recovering and articulating ‘lost’ values and meanings, and seeking community endorsement of these values through the listing process’ (Johnston 1992: 17). An all but forgotten event may thus receive contemporary re-invigoration as a local marker or symbol, particularly when it has resonance with important contemporary issues such as housing affordability and homelessness.

This re-invigoration has to some extent already occurred in an uncoordinated way in recent decades. Online posts and journal articles published by the Marrickville Historical Society in 2010 and 2011 deal specifically with the Union Street events, as does a folk song by Hulett and Swarbrick, written in 1997, a play by Sue Smith ‘In the violet time’ written in 2008, a piece written by Lea Redfern in the 1990s for Radio National’s Hindsight team, ‘Forever striking trouble’, and an online archive established by Sydney City Council (SCC) to share historical information about Newtown (the Newtown Project). The events are also documented by historians of Depression Sydney, and those interested in Sydney’s left-wing history, including community organisations such as the NSW Tenants’ Union (Mortimer 1996).

While the event may now have faded from prominence at the local level, with the right memorialisation, it could become a marker of community and labour identity. Community surveys conducted by SCC have found that Newtown residents recognise the ongoing relevance of the issues the UWM fought for, such as housing justice and affordability, and support the retention of heritage buildings (Newtown Neighbourhood Centre 2015).

Discussion

Given the historical importance of this event and its re-emerging social significance, we ask why this property has not previously been listed at the state or local levels? The purpose of a SHR listing is to protect heritage items considered important to the people of NSW. We argue that the struggle of ordinary working people for the right to housing during an economic cataclysm such as the Great Depression, is of heritage significance and deserving of commemoration. Although listings of this type are not common, they have increased in recent years, and there is considerable precedent for listing sites of protest, including the Cyprus-Hellene Club (Elizabeth Street, Sydney) Aboriginal Day of Mourning protest 1938, the Three Proud People Mural on Leamington Lane, Newtown and Juanita Nielsen’s House, Potts Point.

As a contributory item in an HCA, it is acknowledged that the Union Street streetscape is afforded some protection, however its full heritage value is not officially recognised. The development of a Conservation Management Plan (CMP) would be an important step in preserving both the tangible fabric and the intangible associations of this event. A CMP could develop a strategy for safeguarding the remaining tangible traces of the event, such as the bullet holes reportedly still present in the property in 2010 (Preston 2010). Equally important however, would be the development of interpretation strategies to re-invigorate the memory of the event.
While we do not suggest that the neglect of this place and event in the context of NSW’s formal heritage system has been deliberate, and consider it more a product of an historic bias of the system towards the heritage of social elites, it nevertheless reflects a marginalisation of working class heritage within the AHD of the NSW heritage system. This argument is supported by a quantitative analysis of items on the SHI for the suburb of Newtown, which found that of the 104 items listed in February 2019, 22 were directly associated with social elites, most often a prominent person under criteria (b) (association), while only 14 items could be linked with the working class. In all cases these items were related to former working class housing, represented by an individual building or a group of buildings, rather than to prominent working class people or events.

Most items were listed in Newtown under SHR criteria (a), which relates to historic value, and (c), relating to aesthetic value. The latter usually referred to a building’s noteworthy architectural features, while historic value was typically narrowly understood as the way the built environment demonstrated the establishment and development of the suburb, rather than broader factors indicative of its social history. The treatment of the social significance criterion was often poor, and inconsistent, generally not seen as figuring prominently in the articulation of a place’s significance. The only item listed that represented the theme of social protest was the ‘Three Proud People mural on the Leamington Lane elevation’.

Even places recently chosen for recognition in other inner Sydney areas that demonstrate the theme of social protest, such as Juanita Nielsen’s House, Potts Point, are arguably able to be celebrated by the NSW Government because the anti-development political activism of Ms Nielson can be seen as an antecedent to the current heritage and planning system. It represents social protest that contributed to a new social and political consensus on protection of the built environment. However the events at Union Street remain dissonant and uncomfortable heritage, evoking the suffering of working class people during the Depression, and the outrage of police opening fire on unemployed people allegedly armed only with makeshift weapons.

It is also the case that the events at Union Street represent social action by the unemployed, a group that remain vilified and unpopular, even in 21st century Australia. UWM slogans calling for ‘Work or Basic Wage Maintenance’ and ‘We Demand the Right to Live’ are equally relevant to the unemployed today. A case in point is a 2019 news report in which Labor’s social services spokeswoman Linda Burney discusses the problem of public perception, and the need to ‘win the argument in public’ to increase the Newstart allowance, which has not been increased in real terms since 1994 (Sun Herald 17 February 2019: 12).

While there is a positive story to be told about the events of Union Street, of working class initiative, capability and a self-directed assertion of human rights, and links to be made with the ongoing struggle for housing justice for renters, particularly socio-economically disadvantaged ones, state authorities may question if this is a story the public wants to hear.

**Conclusion**

We have argued that the events of 19 June 1931 at Union Street are of heritage value for reasons of historic and social significance and that they represent a neglected aspect of the heritage of NSW. The fact that this place has not been recognised previously, we contend, reflects an historic bias of the NSW heritage system towards conserving the built heritage of elites, and towards conserving heritage that tells positive stories of the nation, and suggests a neglect of the dissonant heritage of working class people and their social movements. This neglect could be addressed through the development of a CMP, for example, to further research how the historic and social significance of these events are embodied and evoked by the physical fabric of the place and its narratives.

A CMP could develop a strategy and design for onsite interpretation referring to the event, such as a through a commemorative mural—today a distinctive feature of Newtown—located close to the site. Union Street could also be included in local heritage walking tours conducted by SCC and the Marrickville Heritage Society. Offsite exhibitions using archival photos, and
other primary and secondary historical sources at local libraries and museums, in addition to online exhibitions, would also preserve the intangible significance of the event. These strategies would go some way to ensuring that an important historical event associated with working class Australians’ struggle for social justice, a struggle with ongoing contemporary resonance, achieves the recognition and remembrance that we have argued it deserves.

References


Hewison, R. 1987, The heritage industry: Britain in a climate of decline, Methuen, London.


McWilliams, D. 1977, *Depression down under*, Len Fox, Potts Point, Sydney.


Endnotes

1 As this property is a private dwelling further details are not discussed in this article due to privacy reasons.

2 The land was bought by Nicholas Devine in 1799, and was part of the Parish of Cumberland in the County of Petersham (Sydney City Council n.d.a). The property dates from at least the late 1880s, as The Newtown Project reports that it was probably owned by George Crosby, a butcher, from 1883-1900, who lived next door between these dates and is listed as the ratepayer for the site between 1887 and 1892 (SCC n.d.b).

3 The UWM also resisted an eviction order at 92 Brancourt Ave, Bankstown on 17 June 1931, resulting in a violent eviction by police, arrests of the anti-evictionists and a trial, resulting in the conviction and imprisonment of the men involved (Cottle and Keys 2008).

4 This song is attributed to Anon, and described as a Traditional Verse of the 1930s in Nadia Wheatley’s novel, The House that was Eureka, published in 1987, by Puffin, Ringwood, Victoria.