

The Ballad of 1891

Words by Helen G Palmer (daughter of Vance and Nettie) and music by Doreen M Bridges and popularised in the Australian musical 'Reedy River'. The Shearers' Strike of 1891 and its aftermath were the origins of the Labor Party as workers strove for a political voice.

The price of wool was fall - ing in eight - een nine - ty one;

The men who owned the ac - res saw some - thing must be done;

"We will break the shear - ers' un - ion and show we're mast - ers still,

And they'll take the terms we give them or we'll find the men who will!"

From Clermont to Barcaldine the shearers' camps were full,
Ten thousand blades were ready to strip the greasy wool,
When through the west like thunder rang out the union's call:
"The sheds'll be shore union or they won't be shorn at all!"

Now Billy Lane was with them – his words were like a flame;
The flag of blue above them, they spoke Eureka's name.
"Tomorrow", said the squatters, "You'll find it does not pay –
We're bringing up free labourers to get the clip away!"

"Tomorrow", said the shearers, "They may not be so keen –
We can mount three thousand horsemen to show them what we mean!"
"Then we'll pack the west with troopers from Bourke to Charters Towers
You can have your fill of speeches, but the final strength is ours!"

"Be damned to your six-shooters, your troopers and police –
The sheep are getting heavy, the burr is in the fleece!"
"Then if Nordenfeldt and Gatling won't bring you to your knees,
We'll find a law", the squatters said, "That's made for times like these!"

To trial at Rockhampton the fourteen men were brought;
The Judge had got his orders: the squatters owned the court –
But for every one was sentenced, a thousand won't forget
When they gaol a man for striking, it's a rich man's country yet!