

**AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL FOR THE DEFENCE OF
GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS
PRESS RELEASE 889
MAY DAY MEMORIES
THE BURSTON STRIKE SCHOOL
AND THE
BATTLE FOR NORTHLAND SECONDARY COLLEGE
AND
RICHMOND SECONDARY COLLEGE**

This May Day 2021 DOGS would like to remember Jack Farrer, an English migrant to Australia who helped organise the May Day marches for many years with Frank Little and his wife. He was a stalwart of 3CR and HAAG – an organisation for homeless people.

Jack married an Anglican Deaconess, a widow with a small son. He worked at many jobs keeping his little family and helping his wife in her job with disabled people. He paid for the private education of the son who went on to become the vicar of Christ Church Brunswick and the Bishop of Wangaratta.

DOGS members found Jack on the street, homeless because his wife had died and her son had gone on a holiday to England and left him on the street. Apparently his socialist ideas were not welcome at the same dinner table as Bishop Hollingsworth.

So members of the DOGS took him in. We had been involved with the Battle for Richmond Secondary College and it was Jack who told us about the Burston Rebellion in England.

So to day, May Day, we remember the English unionists and the Burston rebellion and the part played by like-minded people here in Melbourne when Jeff Kennett closed our public schools. The battle for Northland and Richmond secondary colleges are now part of our own history.

1. The Burston Rebellion story.

The **Burston Strike School** was founded as a consequence of a school strike and became the centre of the longest running strike in British history, that lasted from 1914 to 1939 in the village of [Burston](#) in Norfolk, England. Today, the building stands as a museum to the strike. Every year hundreds of people turn up for a rally to commemorate the 25-year strike over the jobs of [Annie Higdon](#) and her husband.



History

The strike began when teachers at the village's [Church of England](#) school, [Annie Higdon](#) and her husband, Tom Higdon, were [sacked](#) after a dispute with the area's school management committee. The schoolchildren – led by Violet Potter – went on strike in their support. Encouraged by the community, the Higdons went on to set up an alternative school which was initially attended by 66 of their 72 former pupils. Beginning in a marquee on the [village green](#), the school moved to a local carpenter's premises and later to a purpose-built school financed by donations from the labour movement. Burston Strike School carried on teaching local children until shortly after Tom's death in 1939.

Read further at

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Burston_Strike_School

2. THE BATTLE FOR NORTHLAND COLLEGE

The Northland Secondary College story has been written up by Georgina Meyer at

<http://www.kooriweb.org/foley/great/northlands.htm>

This paper aims to look at the Victorian State Government's closure of Northland Secondary College on the 20th of November 1992, and the subsequent reopening which occurred after two and a half years of court battles and protests. Meyer's analysis looks closely at the reactions to these events from the media and the Victorian Kennett Government and assesses what can be divulged from such a study. Northland Secondary College claimed, and was announced by many that were associated with the school, that it was a unique institution that offered high education hopes for disadvantaged students, in particular Koori students. The events surrounding Northland Secondary College and its battle to remain open also mark a significant episode within the history of Victoria and highlight fundamental problems Aboriginal People, particularly students, face within Victoria's education system.

This essay is not simply about a school that fought Government closure and won. It is about a significant event in the history of Aboriginal people in Victoria and the need for their history and difficulties within this society to be acknowledged. The Equal Opportunity Board and the Full Bench of the Supreme Court reopened Northland Secondary College on the grounds of racial discrimination. This ruling grants hope that Aboriginal hardship, particularly in

education, is finally acknowledged, at some level, by the mainstream culture within Victoria. However, that the Victorian Kennett Government relentlessly fought this ruling exposes the Government's reluctance to acknowledge Aboriginal hardships and history. This essay will analyse these events, look at why Northland was so special, how the fight took place and the significance of mainstream media and Government response throughout the two and a half year battle. It is important to look at such responses, as they not only reflect public opinion, they reveal gross ignorance within two such influential powers in Victoria - the media and the Government.

A cabaret production, which shows how this much loved school was saved is running at the Meat Market in North Melbourne from May 7 to 9th. It involves more than 30 people who were part of the campaign to save the school.

It will include storytelling, music, dance, comedy and archival footage.

<https://www.theage.com.au/national/victoria/cabaret-tells-how-loved-melbourne-school-was-saved-from-kennett-closures-20210421-p5718x.html>

THE BATTLE FOR RICHMOND SECONDARY COLLEGE

The story of this battle has been written up by Steven Jolley and his fellow battlers in a book entitled *Behind the Lines*. The DOGS paid for its publication.

Below is a review of the book itself by Sean Lennon at

<https://www.greenleft.org.au/content/battle-richmond-secondary-college>

Behind the Lines

By Stephen Jolly

Global Books, 1996. 296 pp. \$20

Review by Sean Lennon

Shortly after coming to office in Victoria in 1992, the Kennett government announced a range of cuts to public services, which included closing 55 schools. One of the schools targeted for closure was the Richmond Secondary College (RSC).

Teachers, parents and students at Richmond had other ideas. For almost a year, they occupied the site and ran a rebel school, frustrating the Directorate of School Education (DSE) bureaucrats and their political masters, who originally planned to demolish the school and sell the land to private developers.

Only the fact that people were prepared to fight stopped those plans in their tracks. While other schools were occupied in the immediate aftermath of the closures, only the occupations at Richmond and Northland survived long enough to pose any sort of threat to the Kennett government's agenda.

A leader of Militant and one of the main participants in the campaign to save RSC, Jolly gives us insight into how it unfolded. We get a good feel for the debates that were a constant theme of both the occupation and the aftermath of " Bloody Monday", when picketers were violently attacked by the police.

Jolly also gives a good feel for the continual tension faced by the occupiers and a horrifying glimpse of the police tactics leading up to and including the infamous baton charge on December 13, 1993. Not only did the DSE have no intention of reaching agreement with the occupiers, but it and the Kennett government were only too willing to use force to get their way.

Of course, the campaign has to be seen against the broader struggle to reverse the Kennett government's attacks. Jolly goes into detail about the sell-outs of the union officialdom, despite the willingness of the membership to fight. The VSTA branch, for example, stood behind the Richmond campaign, while the leadership shied away from any meaningful industrial action.

The lack of a real fight against Kennett by union leaderships is part of the reason the Richmond campaign became increasingly isolated. The Trades Hall picket lines were only too quickly abandoned once the possibility of a settlement with the government emerged.

Jolly's assessment of the role played by other left groups, however, leaves something to be desired. His biggest complaint is that we didn't all drop everything else and make Richmond our sole priority.

For an organisation of a few dozen people playing a leading role in such a struggle, it is easy to mistake that struggle as *the* battle of the month, year or even decade. But in fact the class struggle continues in other arenas as well, and it would be foolish of the left as a whole to pretend otherwise.

But three years on, the campaign to save Richmond Secondary College remains a source of inspiration for those who do not accept the neo-liberal agenda of cuts. As a description of that campaign, Jolly's book is well worth reading.

LISTEN TO THE DOGS PROGRAM
855 ON THE AM DIAL: 12.00 NOON SATURDAYS
<http://www.3cr.org.au/dogs>