

A Death in the Great Strike

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The Great Strike remains Australia's largest strike, with more than 70,000 taking to streets across NSW for six weeks. It also cost 32-year-old Merv Flanagan his life.



Tramway men marching to The Domain during the 1917 General Strike.

During an altercation on Bridge Road, Camperdown, Flanagan – a member of the Trolley, Draymen and Carter's Union, was shot in the chest with a revolver by Reginald Wearne, a stock and station agent brought in as a strike breaker from his hometown of Bingara.

Accounts vary. *The Sydney Morning Herald* at the time reported a group of striking carters including Flanagan assaulted Wearne after abusing him as a “scab”. Flanagan's brother James said Wearne was never assaulted.

Wearne – whose brother was a conservative member of the NSW Parliament – was sensationally acquitted of all charges. Found to have no case to answer by a jury empanelled by an acting coroner who hailed from Bingara, a magistrate subsequently dismissed the charge of “felonious slaying”.

In contrast James Flanagan and fellow striker Henry Williams, who was shot in the leg by Wearne, were each jailed for three months.

Flanagan's death provoked an extraordinary public outpouring of grief. His casket was carried in a horse-drawn hearse as part of a 1.6km funeral procession from Trades Hall to Mortuary Station.